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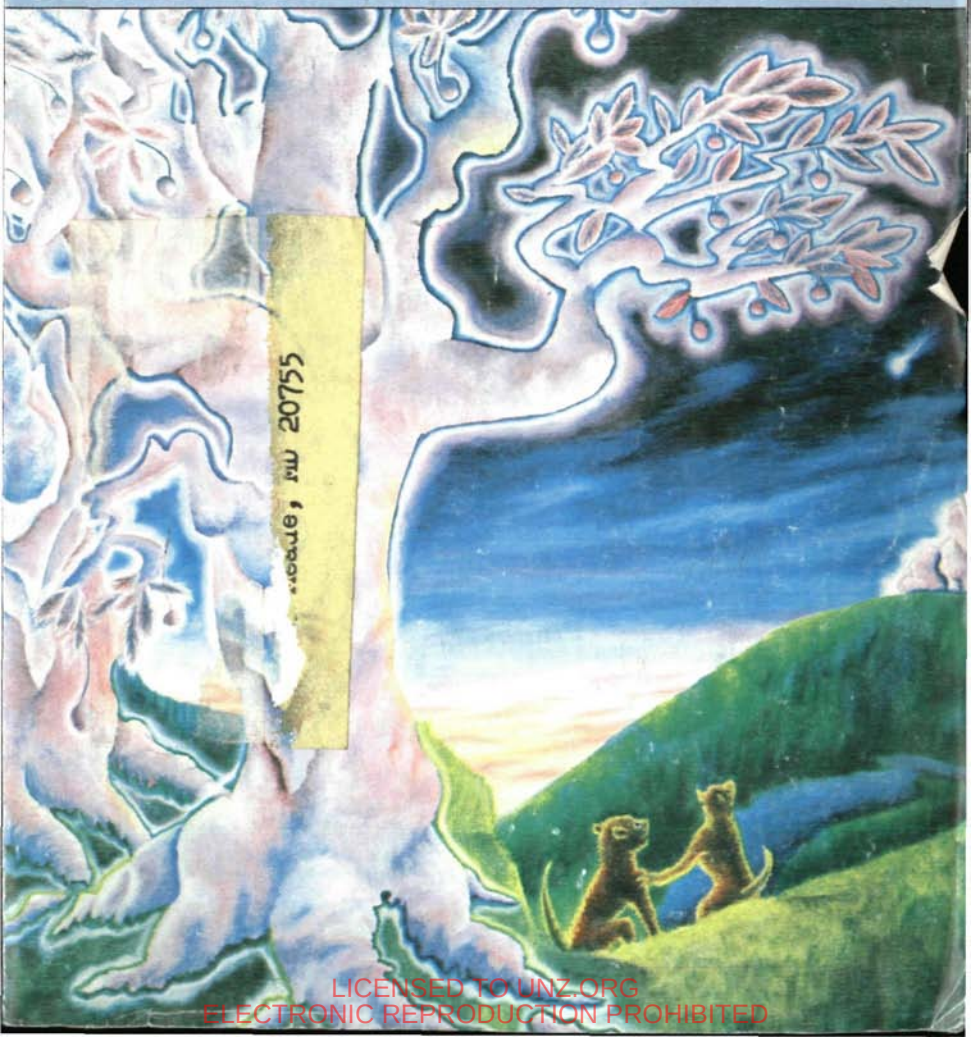
Galaxy

Science Fiction

Cordwainer Smith:

THE QUEEN OF THE AFTERNOON

plus Cherryh Pournelle Larionova



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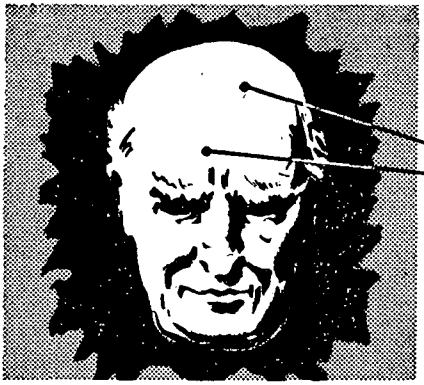

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Once upon a time, after the Ancient Wars, when the Earth slumbered. . . .

Above all, as she began to awaken, she wished for her family. She called to them, "Mutti, Vati, Carlotta, Karla! Where are you?" But of course she cried it in German since she was a good Prussian girl. Then she remembered.

How long had it been since her father had put her and her two sisters into the space capsules? She had no idea. Even her father, the Ritter vom Acht, and her uncle, Professor Doctor Joachim vom Acht—who had administered the shots in Parbudice, Germany, on April 2, 1945—could not have imagined that the girls would remain in suspended animation for thousands of years. But so it was.

AFTERNOON SUNLIGHT gleamed orange and gold on the rich purple shades of the Fighting Trees. Charls looked at the trees, knowing that as the sunset moved from orange to red and as darkness crept over the eastern horizon, they would once again glow with quiet fire.

How long was it since the trees were planted—Fighting Trees, the True Men called them—for the express purpose of sending their immense roots down into the earth, seeking out the radioactives in the soil and the waters beneath, concentrating the poisonous wastes into their hard pods, then dropping the waxy pods until, at some later time, the waters which came from above the earth, and those yet in the earth, would once more be clean? Charls did not know.

One thing he did know. To touch one of the trees, to touch it directly, was certain death.

He wanted very much to break a twig but he did not dare. Not only was it *tambu*, but he feared the sickness. His people had made much progress in the last few generations, enough so that at times they did not fear to face True Men and to argue with them. But the sickness was not something with which one could argue.

At the thought of a True Man, an unaccountable thickness gripped him in the throat. He felt sentimental, tender, fearful; the yearning that gripped him was a kind of love, and yet he knew that it could not be love since he had never seen a True Man except at a distance.

Why, Charls wondered, was he thinking so much about True Men? Was there, perhaps, one nearby?

He looked at the setting sun, which was by now red enough to be looked at safely. Something in the atmosphere was making him uneasy. He called to his sister.

"Oda, Oda!"

She did not answer.

Again he called. "Oda, Oda!"

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This time he heard her coming, ploughing recklessly through the underbrush. He hoped she would remember to avoid the Fighting Trees. Oda was sometimes too impatient.

Suddenly there she was before him.

"You called me, Charls? You called me? You've found something? Shall we go somewhere together? What do you want? Where are mother and father?"

Charls could not help laughing. Oda was always like that.

"One question at a time, little sister. Weren't you afraid you would die the burning death, going through the trees like that? I know you don't want to believe in the *tambu*, but the sickness is real."

"It isn't," she said. She shook her head. "Maybe it was once . . . I guess it really was once," granting him a concession, "but do you, yourself, know of anybody who has died from the trees for a thousand years?"

"Of course not, silly. I haven't been alive a thousand years."

Oda's impatience returned. "*You* know what I mean. And anyway, I decided the whole thing is silly. We all accidentally brush against the trees. So one day I *ate* a pod. And nothing happened."

He was appalled. "You *ate* a pod?"

"That's what I said. And nothing happened."

"Oda, one of these days you're going to go too far."

She smiled at him. "And now I suppose you are going to say that the oceans' beds were not always filled with grass."

He was indignant. "No, of course I know better than that. I know that the grass was put into the oceans for the same reason that the Fighting Trees were planted—to eat up all the poisons that the Old Ones left in the days of the Ancient Wars."

How long they would have bickered he did not know, but just then his ears caught an unfamiliar noise. He knew the sound the True Men made as they sped on their mysterious errands in the upper air. He knew the ominous buzz that the Cities gave off should he approach them too closely. He knew also the clicking noises that the few remaining manshonyaggers made as they crept through the Wild, alert for any non-German to kill. Poor blind machines, they were so easy to outsmart.

But this noise, this noise was different. It was nothing he had ever heard before.

The whistling sound rose and throbbed against the upper reaches of his hearing. It had a curiously spiral quality about it as though it approached and receded, all the while veering toward him. Charls was filled with terror, feeling threatened beyond all understanding.

Now Oda heard it too. Their quarrel forgotten, she seized his arm. "What is it, Charls? What could it be?"

His voice was hesitant and full of wonder. "I don't know."

"Are the True Men doing something, something new that we never heard before? Do they want to hurt us, or enslave us? Do they want to catch us? Do we want to be caught?

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Charls, tell me, do we want to be caught? Could it be the True Men coming? I seem to smell True Man. They *did* come once before and caught some of us and took them away and did strange things to them, so that they looked like True Men, didn't they, Charls? Could it be the True Men again?"

In spite of his fear, Charls had a certain amount of impatience with Oda. She talked so much.

The noise persisted and intensified. Charls sensed that it was directly over his head, but he could see nothing.

Oda said, "Charls, I think I see it. Do you see it, Charls?"

Suddenly he too saw the circle—a dim whiteness, a vapor train that increased in size and volume. Concomitantly the sound increased, until he felt his eardrums would burst. It was nothing ever before seen in his world. . . .

A thought struck him. It was as hard as a physical blow; it sapped his courage and manhood as nothing before had ever done; he did not feel young and strong any more. He could hardly frame his words.

"Oda, could that be—"

"Be what?"

"Could it be one of the old, old weapons from the Ancient Past? Could it be coming back to destroy us all, as the legends have always foretold? People have always said they would come back. . . ." His voice trailed off.

Whatever the danger, he knew that he was completely helpless, helpless to protect himself, helpless to protect Oda.

Against the ancient weapons there was no defense. This place was no safer than that place, that place no better than this. People still had to live their lives under the threat of weapons from long, long ago. This was the first time that he personally had met the threat, but he had heard of it. He reached for Oda's hand.

Oda, singularly courageous now that there was real danger, drew him over onto the bank, away from the *cenote*. With half his mind he wondered why she seemed to want to move away from the water. She tugged at his arm, and he sat down beside her.

Already, he knew, it was too late to go looking for their parents or others of their pack. Sometimes it took a whole day to round up the entire family—the *thing* was coming down relentlessly, and Charls felt so drained of energy that he stopped talking. He thought at her: *Let's just wait it out here,* and she squeezed his hand as she thought back: *Yes, my brother.*

The long box in the circle of light continued to descend, inexorable.

It was odd. Charls could feel a human presence, but the mind was strangely closed to him. He felt a quality of mind that he had never felt before. He had read the minds of True Men as they flew far overhead; he knew the minds of his own people; he could distinguish the thoughts of most of the birds and beasts; it was no trouble to detect the crude electronic hunger of the mechanical mind of a manshonyagger.

But this—this being had a mind that was raw, elemental, hot. And closed.

Now the box was very near. Would it crash in this valley or the

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next? The screams from within it were extremely shrill. Charls' ears hurt and his eyes smarted from the intensity of heat and noise. Oda held his hand tightly.

The object crashed into the ground.

It ripped the hillside just across the *cenote*. Had Oda not instinctively moved away from the *cenote*, the box would have hit *them*, Charls realized.

Charls and Oda stood up cautiously.

Somehow the box must have decelerated: It was hot, but not hot enough to make the broken trees around it burst into flame. Steam rose from the crushed leaves.

The noise was gone.

Charls and Oda moved to within ten man-lengths of the object. Charls framed his clearest thought and flung it at the box: *Who are you?*

The being within obviously did not perceive him as he was. There came forth a wild thought, directed at living beings in general.

Fools, fools, help me! Get me out of here!

Oda caught the thought, as did Charls. She stepped in mentally and Charls was astonished at the clarity and force of her inquiry. It was simple but beautifully strong and hard. She thought the one idea:

How?

From the box there came again the frantic babble of demand: *The handles, you fools. The handles on the outside. Take the handles and let me out!*

Charls and Oda looked at each other. Charls was not sure that he really wanted to let this creature "out." Then he thought further. Maybe the unpleasantness that radiated from the box was simply the result of imprisonment. He knew that he himself would hate to be encased like that.

Together Charls and Oda risked the broken leaves, walking gingerly up to the box itself. It was black and old; it looked like something the elders called "iron"—and never touched. They saw the handles, pitted and scarred.

With the ghost of a smile, Charls nodded to his sister. Each took a handle and lifted.

The sides of the box crackled. The iron was hot but not unbearably so. With a rusty shriek, the ancient door flew open.

They looked into the box.

There lay a young woman.

She had no fur, only long hair on her head.

Instead of fur, she had strange, soft objects on her body but as she sat up, these objects began to disintegrate.

At first the girl looked frightened; then, as she glanced at Oda and Charls, she began to laugh. Her thought came through, clearly and rather cruelly: *I guess I don't have to worry about modesty in front of puppy dogs.*

Oda did not seem to mind the thought but Charls' feelings were hurt. The girl said words with her mouth but they could not understand them. Each of them took an elbow and led her to the ground.

They reached the edge of the *cenote* and Oda gestured to the strange girl to sit down. She did, and made more words.

Oda was as puzzled as Charls,

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but then she began to smile. Spieking had worked before, when the girl was in the box. Why not now? The only thing was, this odd girl did not seem to know how to control her thoughts. Everything she thought was directed at the world at large—at the valley, at the sunset sky, at the *cenote*. She did not seem to realize that she was shouting every thought aloud.

Oda put her question to the young woman: *Who are you?*

The hot, strange mind flung back quickly: *Juli, of course.*

At this point Charls intervened. *There's no "of course" about it* he spieked.

What am I doing? the girl's thoughts ran. *I'm in mental telepathy with puppy-dog people.*

Embarrassed. Charls and Oda watched her as her thoughts splashed out.

"Doesn't she know how to close off her thoughts?" Charls wondered. And why had her mind seemed so closed when she was in the box?

Puppy-dog people. Where can I be if I'm mixed up with puppy-dog people? Can this be Earth? Where have I been? How long have I been gone? Where is Germany? Where are Carlotta and Karla? Where are Daddy and Mother and Uncle Joachim? Puppy-dog people!

Charls and Oda felt the sharp edge of the mind that was so recklessly flinging all these thoughts. There was a kind of laughter that was cruel each time she thought *puppy-dog people*. They could feel that this mind was as bright as the brightest minds of the True Men—but this mind was dif-

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ferent. It did not have the singleness of devotion or the wary wisdom that saturated the minds of the True Men.

Then Charls remembered something. His parents had once told him of a mind that was something like this one.

Juli continued to pour out her thoughts like sparks from a fire, like raindrops from a big splash. Charls was frightened and did not know what to do; and Oda began to turn away from the strange girl.

Then Charls perceived it. Juli was frightened. She was calling them *puppy-dog people* to cover her fear. She really did not know where she was.

He mused, not directing his thought at Juli, *Just because she's frightened, it doesn't mean she has the right to think sharp, bright things at us.*

Perhaps it was his posture that betrayed his attitude; Juli seemed to catch the thought.

Suddenly she burst into words again, words that they could not understand. It sounded as though she were begging, asking, pleading, expostulating. She seemed to be calling for specific persons or things. Words poured forth, and there were names that the True Men used. Was it her parents? her lover? her siblings? It had to be someone she had known before entering that screaming box, where she had been captive in the blue of the sky for . . . for how long?

Suddenly she was quiet. Her attention had shifted.

She pointed to the Fighting Trees.

The sunset had so darkened that the trees were beginning to light up. The soft fire was coming to life as it had during all the years of Charls' life and those of his forefathers.

As she pointed, Juli made words again. She kept repeating them. It sounded like *v-a-s-i-s-d-a-s.*

Charls could not help being a little irritated. *Why doesn't she just think?* It was odd that they could not read her mind when she was using the words.

Again, although Charls had not aimed the question at her, Juli seemed to catch it. From her there came a flame of thought, a single idea, that leaped like a fountain of fire from that tired little female head:

What is this world?

Then the thought shifted focus slightly. *Vati, Vati, where am I? Where are you? What has become of me?* There was something forlorn and desolate to it.

Oda put out a soft hand toward the girl. Juli looked at her and some of the harsh, fearful thoughts returned. Then the sheer compassion of Oda's posture seemed to catch Juli's attention, and with relaxation came complete collapse. The great and terrifying thought disappeared. Juli burst into tears. She put her long arms about Oda. Oda patted her back and Juli sobbed even harder.

Out of the sobbing came a funny, friendly thought, loving and no longer contemptuous: *Dear little puppy dogs, dear little puppy dogs, please help me. You are supposed to be our best friends . . . do help me now. . . .*

Charls perked up his ears. Something—or someone—was com-

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ing over the top of the hill.

Certainly a thought as big and as sharp as Juli's could attract all living forms within kilometers. It might even catch the attention of the aloof but ominous True Men.

A moment later Charls relaxed. He recognized the stride of his parents. He turned to Oda.

"Hear that?"

She smiled. "It's father and mother. They must have heard that big thought the girl had."

Charls watched with pride as his parents approached. It was a well-justified pride. Bil and Kae both appeared, as they were, sensitive and intelligent. In addition, their fur was well-matched. Bil's beautiful caramel coat had spots of white and black only along his cheekbones and nose and at the tip of his tail; Kae was a uniform fawn-beige with which her beautiful green eyes made a striking contrast.

"Are you both all right?" Bil asked as they approached. "Who is that? She looks like a True Man. Is she friendly? Has she hurt you? Was she the one who was doing all that violent thinking? We could feel it clear across the hillside."

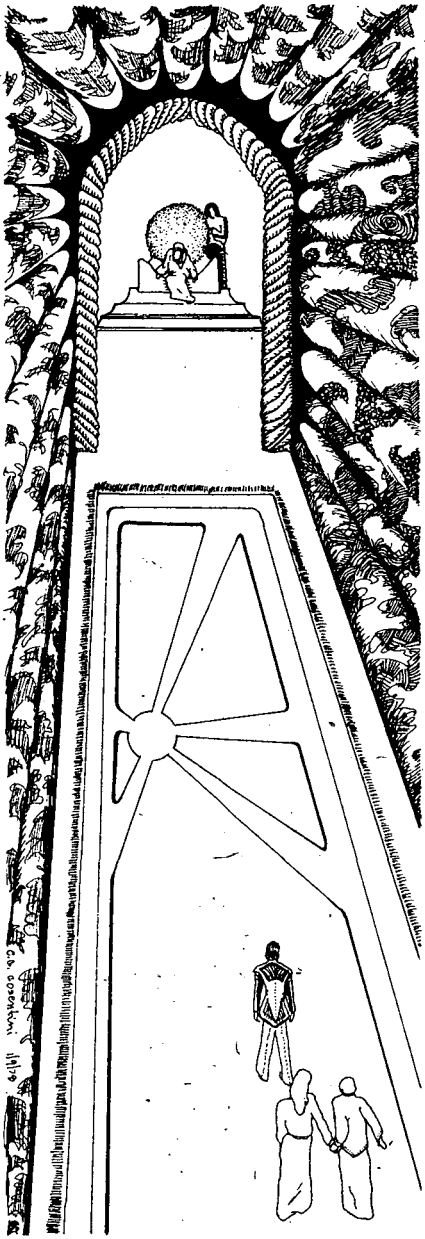
Oda burst into a giggle. "You ask as many questions as I do, Daddy."

Charls said, "All we know is that a box came from the sky and that she was in it. You heard that shrieking noise as it came down first, didn't you?"

Kae laughed. "Who didn't hear it?"

"The box hit right over there. You can see where it hurt the hillside."

The area where the box had



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landed was black and forbidding. Around it the fallen Fighting Trees gleamed in tangled confusion on the ground.

Bil looked at Juli and shook his head. "I don't see why she wasn't killed if it hit that hard."

Juli began to speak in words again, but at last she seemed to understand. Shouting her language would not help any. Instead, she thought: *Please, dear little puppy dogs. Please help me. Please understand me.*

Bil kept his dignity but he noticed with dismay that his tail was wagging of its own accord. He realized that the urge was uncontrollable. He felt both resentful and happy as he thought back at her: *Of course we understand you and we'll try to help you; but please don't think your thoughts so hard or so recklessly. They hurt our minds when they are so bright and sharp.*

Juli tried to turn down the intensity of her thought. She pleaded: *Take me to Germany.*

The four Unauthorized Men—mother, father, daughter and son—looked at each other. They had no idea of what a Germany might be.

It was Oda who turned to Juli, girl to girl, and spieked: *Think some Germany at us so we can know what it is.*

There came forth from the strange girl images of unbelievable beauty. Picture after clear picture emerged until the little family was almost blinded by the magnificence of the display. They saw the whole ancient world come to life. Cities stood bright in a green-encircled world. There were no aloof and languid True Men; instead, all the people they saw in Juli's mind resembled Juli herself. They were vital, sometimes fierce, forceful; they were tall, erect, long-fingered; and of course they did not have the tails of the Unauthorized Men. The children were pretty beyond belief.

The most amazing thing about this world was the tremendous number of people in it. The people were thicker than the birds of passage, more crowded than the salmon at running time.

Charls had thought himself a well-traveled young man. He had met at least four dozen other persons besides his own family, and he had seen True Men in the skies above him hundreds of times. He had often witnessed the intolerable brightness of cities and had walked around them more than once until, each time, he had been firmly assured that there was no way for him to enter. He thought his valley a good one. In a few more years he would be old enough to visit the nearby valleys and to look for a wife for himself.

But this vision that came from Juli's mind . . . he could not imagine how so many people could live together. How could they all greet each other in the mornings? How could they all agree on anything? How could they all ever become still enough to be aware of each other's presence, each other's needs?

There came a particularly strong, bright image. Small-wheeled boxes were hurtling people at insensate speed up and down smooth, smooth roads.

"So that's what *roads* were for," he gasped to himself.

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Among the people he saw many dogs. They were nothing like the creatures of Charls' world. They were not the long, otter-like animals whom the Unauthorized Men despised as lowly kindred; nor were they like the Unauthorized Men themselves, and they were certainly not like those modified animals who in appearance were almost indistinguishable from True Men. No, these dogs of Juli's world were bounding, happy creatures with few responsibilities. There seemed to be an affectionate relationship between them and the people there. They shared laughter and sorrow.

Juli had closed her eyes as she tried to bring Germany to them. Concentrating hard, now she brought into the picture of beauty and happiness something else—fearful flying things that dropped fire; thunder and noise; a most unpleasant face, a screaming face with a dab of black fur above the mouth; a licking of flame in the night; a thunder of death machines. Across this thunder there was the image of Juli and two other girls who resembled her; they were moving with a man, obviously their father, toward three iron boxes that looked like the one Juli had landed in. Then there was darkness.

That was Germany.

Juli slumped to the ground.

Gently the four of them probed at her mind. To them it was like a diamond, as clear and transparent as a sunlit pool in the forest, but the light it shot back to them was not a reflection. It was rich and bright and dazzling. Now that it was at rest, they could see deeply into it. They saw hunger, hurt and loneliness. They saw a loneliness so great that each of them in turn tried to think of a way to assuage it. *Love,* they thought, *what she needs is love, and her own kind.* But where would they find an Ancient One? Would a True Man answer?

Bil said, "There's only one thing to do. We've got to take her to the house of the Wise Old Bear. He has communications with the True Men."

Oda cried out, "But she hasn't done anything wrong!"

Her father looked at her. "Darling, we don't know what this is. She's an Ancient One come back to this world after a sleep in space itself. It's been thousands of years since her world lived; I think she's beginning to realize that, and that's what put her into shock. We need help. Our people may once have been dogs, and that's what she thinks we are. We can't let that bother us. But she needs a house, and the only unauthorized house that I know of belongs to the Wise Old Bear."

Charls looked at his parents. His eyes were troubled. "What is this business about dogs? Is that why we feel so mixed up when we think about True Men? I'm confused about her too. Do you suppose I really want to belong to her?"

"Not really," his father said. "That's just a feeling left over from long, long ago. We lead our own lives now. But this girl, she's too big a problem for us. We will take her to the Bear. At least he has a house."

Juli was still unconscious, and to them she was so big. Each took a limb and with difficulty they man-

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aged to carry her. Within less than a tenth of a night they had reached the house of the wise Old Bear. Fortunately they had not met any manshonyaggers or other dangers of the forest.

At the door of the house of the Wise Old Bear they gently laid the girl on the ground.

Bil shouted, "Bear, Bear, come out, come out!"

"Who is there?" a voice boomed from within.

"Bil and his family. We have an Ancient with us. Come out. We need your help."

The light that had been streaming from the doorway with a yellow glare was suddenly reduced to endurable proportions as the immense bulk of the Bear loomed in the doorway before them.

He pulled his spectacles from a case attached to his belt, put them on his nose and squinted at Juli.

"Bless my soul," he said. "Another one. Where on earth did you get an ancient girl?"

Pompous but happy, Charls spoke up, "She came out of the sky in a screaming box."

The Bear nodded wisely.

Then Bil spoke up. "You said 'another one.' What did you mean?"

The Bear winced slightly. "Forget I said that," he told them. "I forgot for a moment that you are not True Men. Please forget it."

Bil said, "You mean it's something Unauthorized Men are not supposed to know about?"

The Bear nodded unhappily.

Understanding, Bil said, "Well, if you *can* ever tell us about it, will you, please?"

"Of course," the Bear replied. "And now I think I'd better call my housekeeper to take care of her. Herkie, Herkie, come here."

A blonde woman appeared, peering anxiously.

Obviously there was something the matter with her blue eyes but she seemed to be functioning adequately.

Bil backed away from the door. "That's an Experimental person," he said. "That's a cat!"

The Bear was completely uninterested. "So it is, but you can see that her eyes are imperfect. That's why she is allowed to be my housekeeper and why her name isn't prefaced by a 'C'."

Bil understood. The errors True Men made in trying to breed Underpersons were often destroyed but occasionally one was allowed to live if it seemed able to function at some necessary task. The Bear had connections with True Men. If he needed a housekeeper, an imperfect modified animal provided an ideal solution.

Herkie bent over Juli's still form. She peered in puzzlement at Juli's face. Then she looked up at the Bear. "I don't understand," she said. "I don't see how it could be."

"Later," the Bear said. "When we are alone."

Herkie strained to see into the darkness and perceived the dog family. "Oh, I see," she said.

Bil and Charls were embarrassed. Oda and Kae did not seem to notice the slight.

Bil waved his hand. "Well, good-by. I hope you can take care of her all right."

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"Thank you for bringing her," the Bear said. "The True Men will probably give you a reward."

In spite of himself, Bil felt his tail beginning to wag again.

"Will we ever see her again?" Oda asked. "Do you think we'll ever see her again? I love her, I love her. . . ."

"Perhaps," her father answered. "She will know who saved her, and I think she will seek us out."

* * *

Juli awoke slowly. *Where am I? What is this place?* She had a partial return of memory. *The puppy-dog people. Where are they?* She felt conscious of someone at her bedside. She looked up into clouded blue eyes staring anxiously into hers.

"I'm Herkie," the woman said. "I'm the Bear's housekeeper."

Juli felt as though she had awakened in a mental hospital. It was all so impossible. Puppy-dog people and now a *bear*? And surely the blonde woman with the bad eyes was not a human?

Herkie patted her hand. "Of course you're confused," she said.

Juli was taken aback. "You're *talking!* You're talking and I understand you. You're talking German. We're not just communicating telepathically."

"Of course," Herkie said. "I speak true Doych. It's one of the Bear's favorite languages."

"One of. . . ." Juli broke off. "It's all so confusing."

Again Herkie patted her hand. "Of course it is."

Juli lay back and looked at the ceiling. *I must be in some other world.*

No, Herkie thought at her, *but you've been gone a long time.*

The Bear came into the room. "Feeling better?" he asked.

Juli merely nodded.

"In the morning we will decide what to do," he said. "I have some connections with the True Men, and I think that we had best take you to the Vomacht."

Juli sat up as if hit by a bolt of lightning. "What do you mean, 'the Vomacht'? That is my name, Vom Acht!"

"I thought it might be," the Bear said. Herkie, peering at her from the bedside, nodded wisely.

"I was sure of it," she said. Then, "I think you need some good hot soup and a rest. In the morning it will all straighten itself out."

The tiredness of years seemed to settle in Juli's bones. *I do need to rest* she thought. *I need to get things sorted out in my mind.* So suddenly that she did not even have a chance to be startled by it, she was asleep.

Herkie and the Bear studied her face. "There's a remarkable resemblance," the Bear said. Herkie nodded in agreement. "It's the time differential I'm worried about. Do you think that will be important?"

"I don't know," Herkie replied. "Since I'm not human, I don't know what bothers people." She straightened and stretched to her full length. "I know!" she said. "I *do* know! She must have been sent here to help us with the rebellion!"

"No," the Bear said. "She has been too long in Time for her arrival to have been intentional. It is

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true that she may help us, she may very well help us, but I think that her arrival at this particular time and place is fortuitous rather than planned."

"Sometimes I think I understand a particular human mind;" Herkie said, "but I'm sure you're correct. I can hardly wait for them to meet each other!"

"Yes," he said, "although I'm afraid that it's going to be rather traumatic. In more than one way."

* * *

When Juli awoke after her deep sleep, she found a thoughtful Herkie awaiting her.

Juli stretched and her mind, still uncontrolled, asked: *Are you really a cat?*

Yes, Herkie thought back at her. *But you are going to have to discipline that thought process of yours. Everyone can read your thoughts.*

I'm sorry, Juli spieked, *but I'm just not used to all this telepathy.*

"I know." Herkie had switched to German.

"I still don't understand how you know German," Juli said.

"It's rather a long story. I learned it from the Bear. I think, perhaps, you had better ask him how he learned it."

"Wait a minute. I'm beginning to remember what happened before I fell asleep. The Bear mentioned my name, my family name, Vom Acht."

Herkie switched the subject. "We've made you some clothes. We tried to copy the style of those you had on, but they were coming to pieces so badly that we are not sure we got the new ones right."

She looked so anxious to please that Juli reassured her immediately. *If they fit, I'm sure they'll be just fine.*

Oh, they fit, Herkie spieked. *We measured you. Now, after your bath and meal, you will dress and the Bear and I will take you to the city. Underpersons like me are not ordinarily allowed in the city, but this time I think that an exception will be made.*

There was something sweet and wise in the face with the clouded blue eyes. Juli felt that Herkie was her friend. *I am,* Herkie spieked, and Juli was once more made aware that she must learn to control her thoughts, or at least the broadcasting of them.

You'll learn, Herkie spieked. *It just takes some practice.*

They approached the city on foot, the Bear leading the way, Juli behind him and Herkie bringing up the rear. They encountered two manshonyaggers along the road but the Bear spoke true Doych to them from some distance and they turned silently and slunk away.

Juli was fascinated. "What *are* they?" she asked.

"Their real name is 'Menschenjäger' and they were invented to kill people whose ideas did not accord with those of the Sixth German Reich. But there are very few of them still functional, and so many of us have learned Doych since . . . since. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Since an event you'll find out about in the city. Now let's get on with it."

They neared the city wall and Juli

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became conscious of a buzzing sound, and of a powerful force that excluded them. Her hair stood on end and she felt a tingling sensation of mild electrical shock. Obviously there was a force field around the city.

"What is it?" she cried out.

"Just a static charge to keep back the Wild," the Bear said soothingly. "Don't worry, I have a damper for it."

He held up a small device in his right paw, pushed a button on it, and immediately a corridor opened before them.

When they reached the city wall, the Bear felt carefully along the upper ridge. At a certain point he paused, then reached for a strange-looking key that hung from a cord around his neck.

Juli could see no difference between this section of the wall and any other but the Bear inserted his key into a notch he had located and a section of the barrier swung up. The three passed through and silently the wall fell back into position.

The Bear hurried them along dusty streets. Juli saw a number of people but most of them seemed to her aloof, austere, uncaring. They bore little resemblance to the lusty Prussians she remembered.

Eventually they arrived at the door of a large building that looked old and imposing. Beside the door there was an inscription. The Bear was hurrying them through the entryway.

Oh, please, Mr. Bear, may I stop to read it?

Just plain Bear is all right. And yes, of course you may. It may even help you to understand some of the things that you are going to learn today.

The inscription was in German, and it was in the form of a poem. It looked as though it had been carved hundreds of years earlier (as indeed it had. Juli could not know that at this time).

Herkie looked up. "Oh, the first. . . ."

"Hush." said the Bear.

Juli read the poem to herself silently.

Youth
Fading, fading, going
Flowing
Like life blood from your veins. . . .
Little remains.
The glorious face
Erased,
Replaced
By one which mirrors tears,
The years
Gone by.
Oh, Youth,
Linger yet a while!
Smile
Still upon us
The wretched few
Who worship
You. . . .

"I don't understand it," said Juli.

"You will," the Bear said. "Unfortunately, you will".

* * *

An official in a bright green robe trimmed with gold approached.

"We have not had the honor of your presence for some time," he

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said respectfully to the Bear.

"I've been rather busy," the Bear replied. "But how is she?"

Juli realized with a start that the conversation was not telepathic but was in German. *How do all these people know German?* She unthinkingly flung her thought abroad.

Hush came back the simultaneous warnings from Herkie and the Bear.

Juli felt thoroughly admonished. "I'm sorry," she almost whispered. "I don't know how I'll ever learn the trick."

Herkie was immediately sympathetic. "It *is* a trick," she said, "but you're already better at it than you were when you arrived. You just have to be careful. You can't fling your thoughts everywhere."

"Never mind that now," the Bear said and he turned to the green-uniformed official. "Is it possible to have an audience? I think it's important."

"You may have to wait a little while," the official said, "but I'm sure she will always grant audience to *you*."

The Bear looked a little smug at that, Juli noticed.

They sat down to wait and from time to time Herkie patted Juli's arm reassuringly.

* * *

It was actually not long before the official reappeared. "She will see you now," he said.

He led them through a long corridor to a large room at the end of which was a dais with a chair. "Not quite a throne," Juli thought to herself. Behind the chair stood a young and handsome male, a True Man. In the chair sat a woman, old, old beyond imagining; her wrinkled hands were claws, but in the haggard, wrinkled face one could still detect some trace of beauty.

Juli's sense of bewilderment grew. She *knew* this person, but she did not. Her sense of orientation, already splintered by the events of the past "day," almost disintegrated. She grabbed Herkie's hand as if it were the only familiar element in a world she could not understand.

The woman spoke. Her voice was old and weak, but she spoke in German.

"So, Juli, you have come. Laird told me he was bringing you in. I am so happy to see you, and to know that you are all right."

Juli's senses reeled. She *knew*, she *knew*, but she could not believe. Too much had changed, too much had happened, in the short time that she had returned to life.

Gasping, tentatively she whispered, "Carlotta?"

Her sister nodded. "Yes, Juli, it is I. And this is my husband, Laird." She nodded her head toward the handsome young man behind her. "He brought me in about two hundred years ago, but unfortunately as an Ancient I cannot undergo the rejuvenation process that has been developed since we left the earth."

Juli began to sob. "Oh, Carlotta, it's all so hard to believe. And you're so old! You were only two years older than I."

"Darling, I've had two hundred years of bliss. They couldn't rejuvenate me but they could at least prolong my life. Now, it is not

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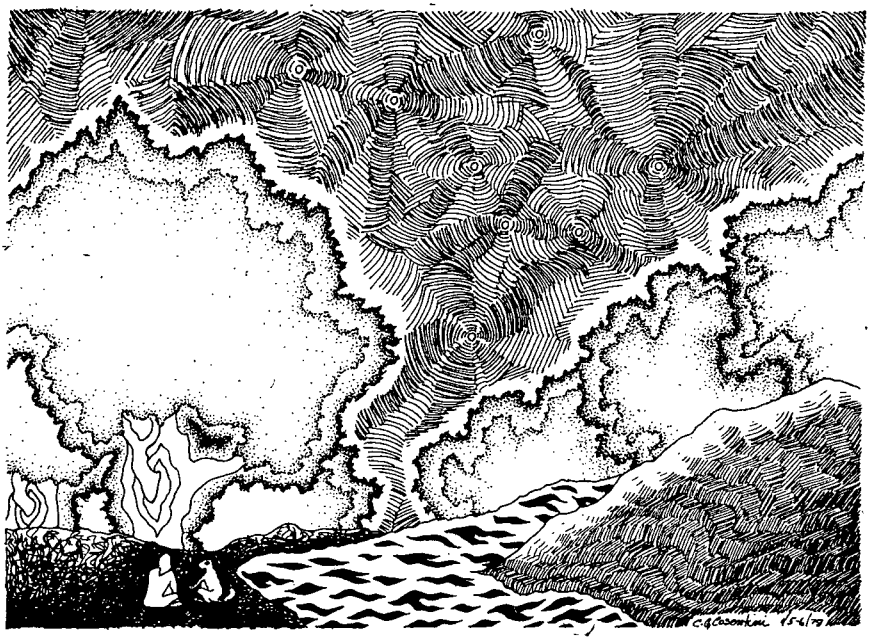

from purely altruistic purposes that I have had Laird bring you in. Karla is still out there, but since she was only sixteen when she was suspended, we thought that you would be better suited to the task.

"In fact, we really didn't do you any favor in bringing you in because now you too will begin to age. But to be forever in suspended animation is not any life either."

"Of course not," Juli said. "And anyway, if I had lived a normal life, I would have aged."

Carlotta leaned over to kiss her.

"At least we're together at last," Juli sighed.

"Darling," Carlotta said, "it is wonderful to have even this little time together. You see, I'm dying. There comes a point when, with all technology, the scientists cannot keep a body alive. And we need help, help with the rebellion."

"The rebellion?"

"Yes. Against the Jwindz. They were Chinesians, philosophers. Now they are the true rulers of the Earth, and we—so they believe—are merely their instrumentality, their police force. Their power is not over the body of man but over the *soul*. That is almost a forgotten word here now. Say 'mind' instead. They call themselves the Perfect Ones and have sought to remake man in their own image. But they are remote, removed, bloodless.

"They have recruited persons of all races, but man has not responded well. Only a handful aspire to the kind of esthetic perfection the Jwindz have as their goal. So the Jwindz have resorted to their knowledge of drugs and opiates to turn True Man into a tranquilized,

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indifferent people—to make it easy to govern them, to control everything that they do. Unfortunately some of our," she nodded toward Laird, "descendants have joined them.

"We need you, Juli. Since I came back from the ancient world, Laird and I have done what we could to free True Men from this form of slavery, because it *is* slavery. It is a lack of vitality, a lack of meaning to life. We used to have a word for it in the old days. Remember? 'Zombie.' "

"What do you want me to do?"

During the entire conversation between the sisters, Herkie, the Bear and Laird had remained silent.

Now Laird spoke. "Until Carlotta came to us, we were drifting along, uncaring, in the power of the Jwindz. We did not know what it was, really, to be a human being. We felt that our only purpose in life was to serve the Jwindz: If they were perfect, what other function could we perform? It was our duty to serve their needs—to maintain and guard the cities, to keep out the Wild, to administer the drugs. Some of the Instrumentality even preyed upon the Unauthorized Men, the Unforgiven and, as a last resort, the True Men, to supply their laboratories.

"But now many of us no longer believe in the perfection of the Jwindz—or perhaps we have come to believe in something more than human perfection. We have been serving men. We should have been serving *mankind*.

"Now we feel that the time has come to put an end to this tyranny. Carlotta and I have allies among some of our descendants and among some of the Unforgiven and, as you have seen, even among the Unauthorized Men and other animal-derived persons. I think there must still be a connection from the time that human beings had 'pets' in the old days."

Juli looked about her and realized that Herkie was quietly purring. "Yes," she said, "I see what you mean."

Laird continued, "What we want to do is to set up a *real* Instrumentality—not a force for the service of the Jwindz, but one for the service of man. We are determined that never again shall man betray his own image. We will establish the Instrumentality of Mankind, one benevolent but not manipulative."

Carlotta nodded slowly. Her aged face showed concern. "I will die in a few days and you will marry Laird. You will be the new Vomacht. With any luck by the time you are as old as I am, your descendants and some of mine should have freed the earth from the power of the Jwindz."

Juli again felt completely disoriented. "I'm to marry your husband?"

Again Laird spoke. "I have loved your sister well for more than two hundred years. I shall love you too, because you are so much like her. Do not think that I am being disloyal. She and I have discussed this for some time before I brought you in. If she were not dying, I should continue to be faithful to her. But now we need you."

Carlotta concurred. "It is true. He has made me very happy, and

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he will make you happy too, through all the years of your life. Juli, I could not have had you brought in had I not had some plan for your future. You could never be happy with one of those drugged, tranquilized True Men. Trust me in this, please. It is the only thing to do."

Tears formed in Juli's eyes. "To have found you at last and then to lose you after such a short time. . . ."

Herkie patted her hand and Juli looked up to see sympathetic tears in her clouded blue eyes.

* * *

It was three days later that Carlotta died. She died with a smile on her face and Laird and Juli each holding one of her hands. She spoke at the last and pressed their hands. "I'll see you later. Out among the stars."

Juli wept uncontrollably.

They postponed the wedding ceremony for seven days of mourning. For once the city gates were opened and the static fields of electricity cut off because even the Jwindz could not control the feelings of the animal-derived persons, the Unauthorized Men, even some of the True Men, toward this woman who had come to them from an ancient world.

The Bear was particularly mournful. "I was the one who found her, you know, after you brought her in," he said to Laird.

"I remember."

So that's what the Bear meant when he said 'another one,' Bil said.

Charls and Oda, Bil and Kae were among the mourners. Juli saw them and thought, *my dear little puppy-dog people*, but this time the thought was loving and not contemptuous.

Oda's tail wagged. *I've thought of something,* she spieked at Juli. *Can you meet me down by the cenote in two days' time?*

Yes, thought Juli, proud of herself at being sure, for the first time, that her thought had gone only to the person for whom it was meant. She knew that she had been successful when she glanced at Laird's face and saw that he had not read her thought.

When she met Oda at the *cenote*, Juli did not know what was expected of her—nor what she herself expected.

You must be very careful in directing your thoughts, Oda spieked. *We never know when some of the Jwindz are overhead.*

I think I'm learning, Juli spieked. Oda nodded.

What my idea was, it was to make use of the Fighting Trees. The True Men are still afraid of the sickness. But, you see, I know that the sickness is gone. I got so tired of brushing past the trees and always worrying about it that I decided to test it out, and I ate a pod from one of the Fighting Trees—and nothing happened. I've never been afraid of them since. So if we met there, we rebels, in a grove of the Fighting Trees, the officials of the Jwindz would never find us. They'd be afraid to hunt for us there.

Juli's face lightened. *That's a very good idea. May I consult with Laird?*

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Certainly. He has always been one of us. And your sister was too.

Juli was sad again. *I feel so alone.*

No. You have Laird, and you have us, and the Bear, and his housekeeper. And in time there will be others. Now we must part.

Juli returned from her meeting with Oda at the *cenote* to find Laird deep in conference with the Bear and a young man who bore a singular resemblance to Laird—and to the youthful Carlotta that Juli remembered.

Laird smiled at her. "This is your great-nephew," he said, "my grandson."

Juli's perspective of time and age received another jolt. Laird appeared to be no older than his grandson. *How do I fit in to this?* she wondered, and accidentally broadcast the thought.

"I know that all of this must be difficult for you to comprehend," Laird said, taking her hand. "Carlotta had some difficulty in adjusting too. But try, please try, my dear, because we need you so desperately and I, I particularly, have already become dependent on you. I could not face Carlotta's loss without you."

Juli felt a vague sense of embarrassment. "What is my—" she could not say it—"what is his name?"

"I beg your pardon. He is named Joachim for your uncle."

Joachim smiled and then gave her a brief hug. "You see," he said, "the reason we need your help with the rebellion is the cult that was built up around your sister, my grandmother. When she returned to earth as an Ancient One, there was a kind of cult set up about her. That is why she was 'The Vomacht' and why you must also be. It is a rallying point for those of us who oppose the power of the Jwindz. Grandmother Carlotta had a mini-kingdom here, and even the Jwindz could not keep people from coming to pay her court. You must have realized that at the mourning session for her."

"Yes, I could see that she had a great deal of respect from many kinds of people. If she was in favor of a rebellion, I am sure she must have been correct. Carlotta was always a most upright person. And now I must tell you about the plan that Oda proposes." She proceeded to do so.

"It might work," the Bear said. "True Men have been very careful about observing the *tambu* of the Fighting Trees. In fact, I may even have an improvement on Oda's idea." He began to get excited and dropped his spectacles. Joachim picked them up.

"Bear," he said, "you always do that when you're excited."

"I think it means I have a good idea," the Bear said. "Look, why don't we use the manshonyaggers?"

The others looked at him in bewilderment and Laird said slowly, "I think I may see what you're getting at. The manshonyaggers, although there are not many of them left, respond only to German and—"

"And the leaders of the Jwindz are Chinesian, too proud to have learned another language," the Bear broke in, smiling.

"Yes. So if we establish head-

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quarters in the Fighting Trees and let it be known that the new Vomacht is there—"

"And surround the grove with manshonyaggers—"

They were breaking in upon each other as the idea began to take shape. The excitement grew.

"I think it will work," Laird said.

"I think so too," Joachim reassured him. "I will get together the Band of Cousins and after you're established in the Fighting Trees, we'll make a raid on the drug center and bring the tranquilizers to the grove, where we can destroy them."

"The Band of Cousins?" Juli asked.

"Carlotta's and my descendants who have not joined the Instrumentality of the Jwindz," Laird told her.

"Why would *any* of them have joined?"

"Laird shrugged. "Greed, power, all kinds of very human motives. Even an illusion of physical immortality. We tried to give our children ideals but the corruption of power is very great. You must know that."

Remembering a howling, hateful face with a black mustache above the mouth, a face from her own time and place, Juli nodded.

* * *

Herkie and the Bear, Charls and Oda, Bil and Kae accompanied Juli into the grove of Fighting Trees. At first Bil and Kae were reluctant. It was only after Oda's confession of having eaten a pod that they agreed to go, and then Bil's reaction was that of a typical father.

"How *could* you take such a chance?" he asked Oda.

Her eyes were bright and her tail wagged furiously. "I just had to," she said.

He glanced at Herkie. "Now if *she* had done it. . . ."

Herkie drew herself up to her full height. "I think that the relationship of curiosity and cats has, perhaps, been a little exaggerated," she said. "Actually, we're generally rather careful."

"I didn't mean to be disrespectful," Bil said hastily, and Herkie saw his tail droop.

"It's a common misconception," she said kindly and Bil's tail straightened.

When they reached the center of the grove, they spread a picnic and gathered around. Juli was hungry. In the city she had been offered synthetic food, no doubt healthful and full of vitamins but not satisfying to the appetite of an Ancient Prussian girl. The animal-derived persons had brought real *food* and Juli ate happily.

The Bear, in particular, noticed her enjoyment. "You see," he said, "that's how they did it."

"Did what?" asked Juli, her mouth full of bread.

"How they drugged the majority of True Men. True Men were so accustomed to living on synthetic foodstuffs that when the Jwindz introduced tranquilizers into the synthetics, True Men never knew the difference. I hope that if the Band of Cousins succeeds in capturing the drug supply, the withdrawal symptoms for the True Men will not be too severe."

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Bil looked up. "That's something we should consider," he said. "If there *are* severe withdrawal symptoms, a number of the True Men may be tempted to join the Jwindz in an attempt to recover the drugs."

The Bear nodded. "That's what I was thinking," he said.

* * *

It was several days before Laird, Joachim and the Band of Cousins joined them. By this time Juli had become almost accustomed to the daylight darkness under the thick leaves and branches of the Fighting Trees, and the soft-glowing illumination at night.

Laird greeted her affectionately. "I have missed you," he said simply. "Already I have grown very attached to you."

Juli blushed and changed the subject. "Did you—or, rather, the Band of Cousins—succeed?"

"Oh, yes. There was very little difficulty. The officials of the Jwindz had grown quite careless since they have had the minds of most True Men under their control for generations. It was only a matter of Joachim's pretending to be tranquilized, and he had free access to the drug room. Over a period of days he managed to transfer the entire supply to the Cousins and to substitute placebos. I wonder when *that* will be discovered."

"As soon as the first withdrawal symptoms occur, I should think," Joachim ventured.

Something that had been nagging at the back of Juli's mind surfaced. "You have your *grand*son here, and the Band of Cousins. But where are your and Carlotta's own children? Obviously you had some."

His face saddened. "Of course. But since they were half-Ancient, they could not only not be rejuvenated, but the combination of the chemistry made it such that their lives could not even be prolonged. They all died in their seventies and eighties. It was a great sadness to Carlotta and me. You too, my dear, if we have children, must be prepared for that. By the time of the next generation, however, the Ancient blood is sufficiently diluted that rejuvenation may take place. Joachim is a hundred and fifty years old."

"And you? and you?" she said.

He looked at her. "This is very hard on you, isn't it? I'm over three hundred years old."

Juli could not disbelieve but neither could she quite comprehend. Laird was so handsome and youthful; Carlotta had been so old.

She tried to shake the cobwebs from her mind. "What do we do with the tranquilizers now that we have them?"

Oda had approached at the latter part of the conversation. Her eyes sparkled and her tail wagged madly. "I have an idea," she announced.

"I hope it's as good as your last one," Laird said.

"I hope so too. Look, why don't we just feed the tranquilizers back to the officials? The Jwindz probably will never notice. Then we won't have to worry about fighting them. They could just gradually die off; or maybe . . . do you think . . . we could send them out into space? To another planet?"

Laird nodded slowly. "You do

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have good ideas. Yes, to feed the tranquilizers back to them . . . but how?''

''We work well together,'' the Bear said, indicating Oda. ''She has an idea and it triggers another one in my mind.'' Carefully he put on his spectacles. ''I have here a map of the terrain in this vicinity. Except for the *cenote* there is no water for many kilometers in any direction. If we dropped the tranquilizers—all of them—into the *cenote*, and then if one of the Cousins could prepare the synthetic food of the Jwindz's officials so it was very spicy—I think that the problem would be solved.''

Laird said, ''We do have one of the Cousins who has infiltrated the Jwindz. But what would induce them to drink the water?''

Charls had joined the group. ''I have heard,'' he said, ''of an ancient spice people used to like which eventually produced thirst. It used to be found in the oceans, before they were filled with grass. But some of it remains on the banks of the sea. I believe that it was called 'salt.' ''

''Now that you mention it, I've heard of that too,'' the Bear nodded wisely. ''So that is what we need to do. 'Salt.' We introduce it into their food, then we entice them to the grove with the knowledge that the new Vomacht is here together with the heart of a rebellion. It's risky but I think it's the best idea, or combination of ideas, yet.''

Laird agreed. ''It's as you say, risky, but it may work, and they're not likely to execute any of us if it doesn't. They'll just tranquilize us. I think that we have a better than even chance of winning. And if True Man is not revitalized, not freed from this bondage of tranquility and apathy, I believe that the entire breed will be extinguished within a few hundred years. They have come to the point that they care about nothing.''

* * *

All worlds know how the plan was carried out. It was exactly as the Bear had foretold. The thirsty officials of the Jwindz, their food highly salted, drank eagerly from the water of the *cenote* and were quickly tranquilized. They put up no opposition to the members of the rebellion who soon thereafter emerged from the shelter of the Fighting Trees.

Joachim was sad. ''One of my brothers had joined them,'' he said.

Laird laid a comforting arm across his shoulder. ''Well, he's only tranquilized. We may be able to help him as he comes out of it.''

''Perhaps, but it violates all my principles.''

''Don't be too high-minded, Joachim. Principles are fine, but there is such a thing as rehabilitation.''

And this was the way that the Instrumentality of Mankind was established. In time it would govern many worlds. Juli, by virtue of being the Vomacht, became one of the first Ladies of the Instrumentality. Laird, as her husband, was one of the first Lords.

Juli lived to see some of her descendants among the first great Scanners in Space. She was very proud of them, and she was very

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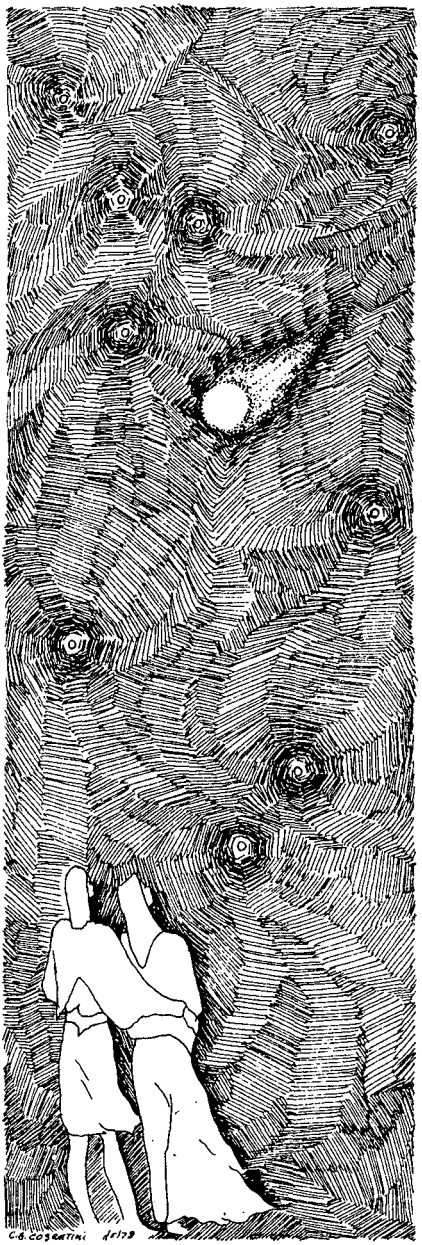

old. Laird, of course, was as young as ever. All of her animal-descended friends had long since died. She missed them, although Laird was ever faithful.

At last, so old that she had difficulty in moving, Juli called Laird to her. She looked up into his handsome face. "My darling, you have made me very happy, just as you did Carlotta. But now I am old and, I think, dying. You are still so young and vital. I wish it were possible for me to undergo the rejuvenation, but since it isn't possible, I think we should call in Karla."

He responded so rapidly that her feelings were somewhat hurt. "Yes, I think that we should call in Karla."

He turned away from her momentarily.

She said, with a hint of tears in her voice, "I know that you will make her happy and love her very much."

His silence continued for a moment before he turned back to her.

She saw suddenly that there were lines in his face, lines she had never seen before.

"What is happening to you?" she asked.

"My darling and last love," he said, "I will be losing you twice. I cannot bear it. I have asked the physician for medicine to counteract the rejuvenation. In an hour I shall be as old as you. We are going together. And somewhere out there we will meet Carlotta and we will hold hands, the three of us, among the stars. Karla will find her own man and her own fate."

Together they sat and watched the descent of Karla's spacecraft. ★

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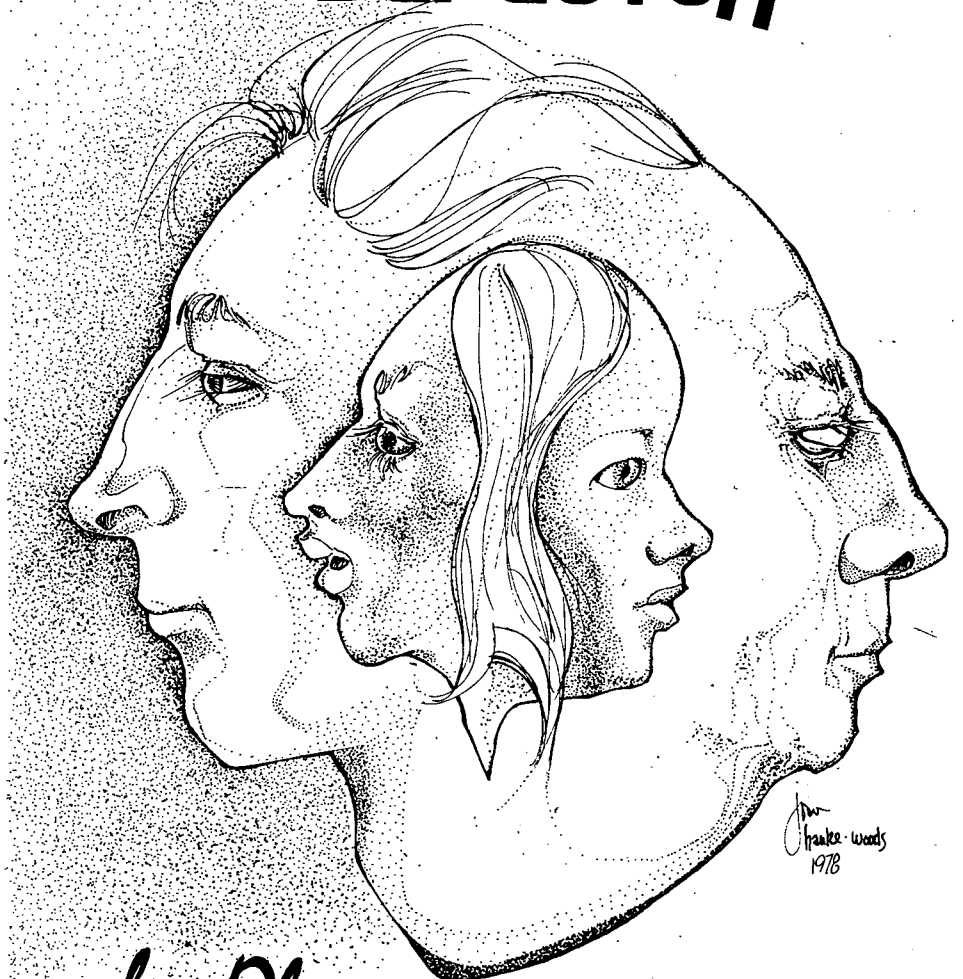
the DEFECTOR



by Olga Larionova

Translator: Patrick L. McGuire

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In Soviet science fiction, the Golden Age was the 1960's—and Olga Larionova one of its stars. Translator Pat McGuire has worked with the Macmillan Russian sf program. An unusual tale of an artist's responsibility.

IT WAS ALREADY past five. Astor walked through the emptying corridors of the Insititute—and the further behind he left the glass doors of the laboratories and workshops, the further he abandoned everyday thoughts, all that made him merely a physicist.

Now he had only to proceed another twenty paces, descend the old-fashioned staircase in the entryway and go down from the Institute and be twenty minutes by air from the Writer's Union.

By the time he got home, he would have ceased to be a physicist because evening was coming on. Evenings he was not just Astor Elamit but the World-Famous Writer. He walked without hurrying although today of all days he really should hurry. Instead, he looked into every doorway and sometimes entered a room and looked around the cabinets and instruments. He was relaxing. This was a small break, a respite, a breathing space between the two states in which he alternated every day. It was just that way—"states", and not "professions." These were the minutes when he allowed himself to be neither one thing nor the other but simply a tired human being, free of everything. As always, he spent those minutes seeking out Rika; he knew she had not yet left the building.

He found her sitting on the windowsill in the small computer room. She sat with her chin resting on her knees, sad and disheveled, and it was clear that Astor would never manage to handle all her small, girlish troubles.

He went over to her. He wanted to say something but he could not even imagine why he had searched her out. It must be that the pleasure of seeing her was itself enough for him.

But now as he looked at her, he could not discern within himself so much as a hint of pleasure. As usual, it was simply not there. What did they have in common, the solid man of science and the towheaded, pint-sized, careless lab assistant? He had often wondered what evil spirit drove him to seek her out, to grope torturously for absurd alien phrases, never knowing how to begin nor—most awful of all—how and when to finish. Still, he had to search for her, had to speak to her, had to look at her . . . .

"Why are you still here?" he asked in muffled voice. "You know

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the building's power transmission is off."

She looked down at him from the height of the windowsill and answered briefly, "I'm not drawing power."

Now I wonder, thought Astor, *what I am going to do with this scene tonight when all this will happen not in life but in my story. When I will no longer be myself but someone younger and more likeable and without that stupid name Astor–it sounds like an aristocratic dog–but instead, Stor, who looks like the brave captain from an old trashy novel and who is endowed with every blessing I myself lack. I've already taken care of the girl—I changed her from skinny, towheaded Rika into Regina, the golden-blonde beauty. But what will I do with this dialogue? Can I let her be so impertinent in my story?*

"Get along home," he ordered sternly. "Assistants are not supposed to remain in the building without the supervision of senior staff."

"So supervise me," she said, drawing her knees up and sliding over to free a bit of windowsill for him. "Sit down alongside me and supervise."

Well, my dear, he thought while continuing to stand there, *this scene I'll certainly save. Without fail my Regina will say, "So supervise me . . ." And she'll bare her soul on the windowsill. But the difference will be that I, or rather not I but Stor, will indeed sit down next to her–and what will come next, oh my, what will come next . . . . It's trite enough to make you sick, to make your hair curl, but I'll write it anyhow. To hell with literature.*

"Listen, young lady," he said, sensing beforehand that he would say the wrong thing, "I've advised you to change your profession. Don't waste your time; you'll never make a good physicist. You don't have that sort of personality."

"I don't plan to be a good physicist," she said without embarrassment. "I'm only starting with that. Afterward I'm going to become a Real Writer, like you."

He looked at her with surprise. At the Institute he never spoke of his second profession—he corrected himself—of his second state. "That is much harder than being a physicist," he said slowly. "A person can write for a whole lifetime and still not become a Real Writer."

"So I'll write all my life."

"But first you have to learn to write on paper. Writing on paper is torture. You know so much about your protagonist that you can no longer tell whether you have managed to imply, to suggest, everything that will not fit into the printed words. The connotations are there because everything that you were thinking while you wrote your novel, or even your little short story, is always inside you. When you re-read what you wrote, a thousand associations spring up in your head. Whether you wish it or not, they create the interlacing of sounds, smells, sensations and desires that turn the written word into living flesh. But all this happens only for you. How can you tell whether it works for the average reader?

"And even to yourself your own stuff can sound entirely different,

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depending on whether it's handwritten or typed or in print. Just try to tell where you came out sounding human and where you got nowhere. You write and write, tortured by what you haven't managed to say, and one fine day you decide to chuck the whole damned business because it's obvious that nothing is ever going to come of it, and then—out of the blue—there's a decision by the Council of the Writers' Union that you've earned the status of a Real Writer. And then you stop writing on paper."

"I want to be just like you," Rika repeated stubbornly. "I want to be a Real Writer and create living people."

She's still just a girl, thought Astor. *Still just foolish. At a particular age they all want to fly to Uranus or go down into the magma or become a Real Writer. Usually this clears up before they're sixteen. Half of them do waste paper on verse or prose but only exceptions ever get beyond paper. Single exceptions on the entire planet. And the rest of them get past the phase. This girl will get past too, by herself, so there's no need to say anything. Trying to talk a girl out of the wish to be something is a thankless task—and a useless one to boot.*

"It's not enough just to want to create living people." He heard his didactic tone with surprise. "That right is conferred by the Writer's Union and even then it is not for life. They give it and they can take it away. Furthermore, there are very few women among the Real Writers. Probably this is because women have the opportunity to create living people by another, more natural means, and this works out better for them."

Rika blushed so vividly that it frightened Astor but she only clapsed her knees more firmly to her breast and waited until it seemed to her that the flush had disappeared—in actual fact, it remained for another ten minutes—and once again she repeated stubbornly and vehemently, "I want to and I will, I want to and I will. They will be my people, all mine. I will invent them, make them breathe, move, suffer. I'll make them live like humans. Do you understand? I'll teach them to live the way I want."

"I understand," Astor said slowly. "I daydreamed about that myself. I dreamed about how my characters would live. I dreamed about how I would bring them into the wide world. I knew before hand just how indecently I would love them. But like you, I forgot that sooner or later I would have to kill them."

Instantly he regretted his words, not because of Rika but simply because he wanted to relax and not think about anything until he got home. Now he would not have even a few minutes' peace. The thing that had tormented him subconsciously during the day—when he had his physics to think about—had broken out into the open.

All this must have shown on his face because Rika lowered her legs from the windowsill, jumped onto the floor and moved toward him. She had a strange, contorted expression on her face.

"Ah, well," he said, and with a wave of his hand he walked past

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her, out of the Institute building, down the short pine lane toward home, where the dictaphone with the direct line to the Writers' Union studio was waiting for him.

He wondered what he was going to do. His story had come to its natural ending—and that ending meant the end of his Stor. An ending did not *have* to be "unhappy"—"zap! zap!" or a dessert-spoonful of poison. It could be otherwise, like "So they were married and they all lived happily ever after." An ending was when the hero—whom you had nursed and raised, whom you had stood on his feet and taught to work wonders you could not perform yourself—went down the section of road you had marked off for him. A culmination, a denouement, and he was no longer your faithful subject. He no longer had anything to do with you. He was not yours any more.

And so you walk for days and torture yourself before placing that final period, and you look for a way of making your hero, if not altogether immortal, then at least mortal in a human fashion. And you can't come up with an anwer and you put it off and put it off, until there comes a day like today, when you absolutely have to finish the story. Because a Real Writer has no business dying before he has settled the fate of his hero. This was harsh but fair. Otherwise everyone would try to leave his work unfinished so his hero could live the illusory life of the Writers' Union studio, live in a world of scenery and the projected three-dimensional figures that represented minor characters, but live even so.

It was a painful business, to cut off the existence of your own hero, and accordingly the opportunity to be a Real Writer was offered only to very courageous people. Astor did not put himself in this category but evidently others thought that he belonged there. He was right and they were wrong. His first story not written on paper, but instead played out by the living people he had created, had been winding down for a long time. But Astor did not have the nerve to end it.

Today he had to do it because his laboratory had scheduled an experiment for tomorrow that could turn out rather badly. Astor would perform it himself—he alone knew how great the risk was.

Tomorrow could be it.

So today he had to finish off Stor.

Astor reached his doorstep and looked back. The bulk of the Institute building, surrounded by pines, towered like a snowy mountain. Probably Rika had climbed back onto the windowsill and was following him with her eyes. Towheaded Rika, whom he *had* to see once a day. Where had she learned about his second state? And then that "I want to create living people." In the studio you did not call your characters "living people." You said "specialized biorobots" or "material images."

But of course they really were living people and they led lives that, although brief and preplanned, were damnably vivid and enviable. Like Stor.

Astor sat down, drew the dictaphone over to himself and suddenly felt . . . a strange, improba-

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ble sensation of momentary omnipotence. Damn it all, you're a human being, by no means stupid, and more or less talented. A Real Writer, to boot. So find a way out, do the impossible, save your Stor. There is still time. And don't drag out all these love affairs, windowsills and golden curls. The important thing is Stor. Save him!

He switched on the dictaphone. "As he left the Institute," he began, "Stor Elamit knew that never again, neither now nor later, would he ever see Regina." *So much for that blonde bitch,* he thought. *I'll dematerialize her without mercy.*

"He walked quickly along the lane and when it ended at the door to his house, he turned and walked around to the landing platform. There, every evening from five o'clock on, a small sports mobile waited for him. He lifted the car into the air and twenty minutes later was at the place where the smoky wall around the Writers' Union studio rose up past the dense pines. The wall enclosed several hundred square kilometers and consequently it seemed to be quite straight so that from a distance of a few score paces, it was impossible to tell which way it curved—toward the observer or away from him. The wall reached high into the sky and perpetual low clouds merged with it, making its outlines infinite. Here Stor had met with Regina for the first time and now he unconsciously sought out the very spot—and began to wait, not knowing himself for what. He sat directly on the short, dry moss and occasionally brushed from his shoes the enormous winered ants that stubbornly forged straight over them."

Astor thought a bit. Perhaps he should add something? He turned off the dictaphone. The paragraph was accepted and entered at the studio. Now, perhaps, the cybereditors had already decoded it and were preparing the needed props: a mobile for the flight and the old sets—a duplicate of the road from the Institute to Astor's house, the landing platform behind the house and, later, the grove by the wall itself. This last would not be a set, but nature, so rare in the studio.

It was time.

Astor went out of the house, brought the car out of the garage and soared sharply upward. He headed not for the main studio building but for the wall, seeking precisely the place that shortly his Stor should approach from the other side.

Astor did not like to fly at high altitude. The busy routes lay to one side and much higher and consequently he could peacefully look down through the transparent floor of the car and try to imagine what was happening at the studio.

Yesterday he had left Stor in his laboratory. The dialogue with Regina stank. You could tell that it only killed time. The segment ended with Stor swearing a blue streak and driving Regina back to her working place.

So right now, before the start of the new episode, the cybereditors were inserting into Stor's memory everything that he had "done" between the conversation with Regina and the time he left the Institute. Perhaps apparatus invisible to Stor

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had already started working and the take had begun. Perhaps Stor was obediently skirting around his house as Astor had dictated, then getting into his mobile. Perhaps the mobile was taking off—not up into the sky as a real mobile would but only a few meters. Perhaps then a sequence taken earlier would be projected and it would seem to Stor that the ground was growing distant, that towns and groves were sweeping past, that roads and canals reached out in man-made straight lines. In fact, however, his prop mobile would move only a few-score meters to the side, toward a place where real trees grew along the forbidden smoky wall. All this would take no longer than thirty seconds since it would not do to make a viewer watch a character sit in a car for a whole half-hour; but when Stor landed, he would have the feeling that the flight had lasted twenty minutes—exactly as Astor had dictated.

A red warning-light flashed on the dashboard. The radar had sensed the wall ahead. Astor began to land the mobile. The trees were so dense that only with difficulty did the car force its way down through the thick branches, finally hovering half a meter above the dry moss.

Astor Elamit got out of the mobile.

He had never before been close to the wall. Now it was right next to him, a mere three or four paces away, and the last trees grew almost on top of it.

Astor took two steps and reached the wall itself. Casually he glanced around—then stopped dead in surprise. The final row of trees, those closest to the wall, were not whole. If you faced them from the direction of the mobile, they were ordinary trees, alive and three-dimensional. But by the wall itself it could be seen that these were only halves, cut off by an invisible vertical plane. The cuts were not bare but covered with a violet-colored substance. Astor could not resist tapping on this covering with his fingertips. There was a muffled sound, as if the half-trees were hollow. He stood still for a while, trying to understand, until he decided that these were prop trees, probably brought outside the studio because real, live vegetation might have gradually worked its way through the wall.

But there was no time to consider the matter further. Over there, beyond the wall, Stor had already arrived since in the films shot in the studio, time flowed differently than it did in the lives of ordinary people. Sometimes the flow was slower and a half-hour in a character's life would be broken down into a multitude of minute episodes, seemingly insignificant if taken individually. But two forces—a benign direction from without and a pitiless necessity from within—threaded these bits together. These minutes of fictional life, their significance multiplied by the slowness of action, loomed close to the viewer as if magnified.

But more often it was the other way around and the characters' years were handled in hours—not encompassing all the trifles and details of those years but only those elements that accorded with the writer's task of fitting a whole life into the short time-slot allotted. And of course

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time, for the material characters—

There you go! thought Astor with surprise. *How did that slip out? Up to this point I have been calling them "living people." And now, before this wall, I automatically use that indecent term, "material character." No. It's not so. They are living people, unusual only in the fact that they are entirely subject to their author. Or at that, not entirely. After all, think of all the times an author has the feeling that his character is breaking away from him, that the words and actions dictated for the character simply will not do. Sometimes an author even recognizes that his very own brainchild is forcing him to scrap the plot he has worked out with loving care because the character can act in only one way. So the author accepts this action and submits to the choice of his offspring. If the author is sensitive of course. There is another type of writer who, in spite of everything, will force his characters to act unnaturally, out of keeping with their psychologies. Usually that's the last work by such an author. They take away his Real Writer status and forbid him use of the studio.*

Astor Elamit could not keep himself—he would have to forfeit his Real Writer status. He had no alternative. Stor was dearer to him than his own self. He had to save him, regardless of the price, regardless of whether Stor himself would really want it. He *must* do it.

Astor took another step forward and was so close to the wall that even a half-step would have plunged his face into the jelly-like mass. His cheeks gave an occasional twitch as if it was an enormous smoke-colored jellyfish hanging there before him. He must go into that unmoving haze. Once again *must*. . . .

But why, up to this moment, had he never asked himself if it were possible to do so? He had always taken it for granted. He knew a great deal about the studio. He knew everything—or thought he knew everything—about the ones who, by the will of the Real Writers, had received the right to life within the walls of this studio, the right to live a life infinitely more vivid, and filled the actions infinitely more consequential, than those of ordinary people. He had repeated this last point to himself hundreds of times.

But what did he really know about the wall? He searched his memory. There was no corner where the knowledge would be hiding.

He felt as if he had once known but now had forgotten. Nothing. Only the feeling that if he crossed to the other side, he would lose forever his right to create living people. And even that was not knowledge but only a guess.

Why had he never known what the wall was? More important, could he, or dared he, walk into it?

He hesitated, expecting that somewhere inside himself the answer would emerge. But it was nowhere to be found, and instead Astor became acutely aware of a gap, an empty place without memory, as if after a faint. Then he sensed a growing feeling of the impossibility, of the impermissibility, of what he was planning to do. Not

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allowing himself to be deflected, he stretched out his arms as do people groping through a fog and stepped into the smoky substance of the wall. For the first moment he could see nothing. Then the smoke cleared and he found himself in an incredible crystalline void. There was a fine silvery film under his feet—and absolutely nothing around him. He had always thought that in such instances people must be horrified, but he felt only uncertainty. He walked forward quickly, still holding out his arms, before him and after a few paces he again encountered a zone of smoke that had arisen seemingly out of nowhere; and once again the smoke cleared and Astor knew with certainty that he was now on the other side.

And that's all there is to it, he said to himself. Very simple. So a human being could in practice walk right through the wall, though he would be penalized for it by exclusion from all work. Well, that was no small price. But what about biorobots? Could they also go through the wall? Wouldn't it have been simpler to order Stor to come to him, out into the world of men?

Somehow this had not occurred to him earlier. Probably it was impossible. Probably. Again he felt strangely vague. There was a gap in his mind. Why did he not know such an important thing about his Stor?

Thinking about Stor returned him to action. There was no time for contemplation. He was in the studio, on forbidden ground. Now the only things that mattered were speed and elusiveness. First he must find Stor. After that he could find out whether or not a biorobot could walk through the wall—the wall he himself had come through without learning a thing about it.

Astor Elamit moved forward, seeking the place that he had twice described in his story—the gnarled stump. Stor was obliged to be sitting on it.

He began to feel uneasy. Uneasy, indeed! He was scared, scared as he had been only in childhood, when you're plunging down into an abyss . . .and a rubber, invisible *thing* is breaking up in front of you. . .and you're falling and falling. . .and light, icy bubbles go through your body and rush upward, up to where you will never return because everything. . .everything. . .is ruined and it's all your fault . . . .

Astor realized that this was the wrong place.

Suddenly he had no desire to search any further, to shout out, to call Stor's name. It was useless. The area of the studio was several hundred square kilometers. And where should he look? To the right? To the left? Why had he been so sure that he would enter at exactly the place where Stor would be waiting? How had he known that he had to come through the wall at precisely this spot?

It was strange, but earlier he had been so confident. Now he felt nothing, precisely nothing, not even the desire to go back. Astor lurched. Trampling bushes, heedless of obstacles, he moved to one side, slipping over dry mold sprinkled with last year's pine needles. He stopped when he came out onto a bare, sunlit hill. Before him, with eyes half closed as if he were laz-

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ily sunning himself, sat an old man.

That does it, thought Astor dismally. He had wandered into an area in use. They were shooting here—it was probably some telling psychological moment, with all the invisible cameras in for the close-up. In fifteen minutes or so the take would be processed, at which time the cybereditor would automatically give the alarm since the sequence would show an extraneous person. And that would be it.

Astor looked again at the old man. Would he be surprised to meet a stranger? Or suppose the old man was from another era? Maybe the story performed here was set fifty years ago. The old man's muted black suit gave no indication.

But the elder simply watched Astor approach. He showed no hint of surprise but rather a certain satisfaction. He had been watching Astor right along but Astor had not realized it because of the other's half-closed eyes. Old people who are very tired often watch in that way.

Astor moved still closer.

"Have a seat," said the old man. He moved over slightly on the trunk of the fallen pine, although there had been enough room as it was. Astor slowly brought one leg over the trunk and sat astride. Reddish flakes of bark, warmed by the sun, showered down like the scales of a great golden fish. *So this is what they're like,* thought Astor as he forthrightly studied the old man. *This is what they're like, the ones that we create with the dubious power of our imaginations. Later we see them as three-dimensional figures on the stereo screen, realistic as hell. But we never meet them like this, made out of flesh and blood. This is an intermediate process excised from the creative act. And probably it has to be that way because if an author had once met his hero the way I have run into this old man, he would be incapable of forcing him to live and think and feel and so on. To the technical personnel of the studio, to biodesigners, neuroplicators, psi-link operators, they remain simply theatrical biorobots—remote-controlled, non-feedback anthropoid automata, how little we understand—no, not "little"; there's no degree. Either you understand or you don't—that how little we understand-no, not "little"; there's no degree. Either you understand or your odn't—that however strange or painful it may be to us, these are really living people.*

The old man continued to look straight ahead, not glancing at Astor, and his small, old hands had their own special way of lying helplessly on his knees. *He's even older than he looks,* thought Astor. *And things in general seem strange. For instance I've seen this old man somewhere before. Though why should that be strange? I couldn't have seen the old man himself—after all, he's a theatrical biorobot, a material image, damn it! But he could have a prototype. Him I've definitely seen. Not at the Institute or I'd remember more clearly. So at the Writers' Union. Come to that, what would happen if I up and ask him who he is?*

Astor was about to open his mouth when the old man slowly turned to him and said, "Very well

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then, I shall have to introduce myself first." Again he looked off into the distance, barely moving his lips as if he expected that Astor would interrupt him. But Astor waited. "you see," said the old man finally, "I am a writer. Somehow it has always been awkward to admit that." He smiled guiltily and his hands trembled with uneasiness. "I am a Real Writer. Or more precisely, I *was* a Real Writer."

Yes, thought Astor. *So was I. But now they'll toss me out of the Union on my ear and the worst of it is that it will all be for nothing. I'm not worth crap. I couldn't bring off one stinking thing.*

"I authored many books," the old man continued. "I was permitted to materialize the last three. Now I am trying to decide which is the most important part, the most joyful part, of the process of creating a Real book. Is it when you have just decided to write a new book, before you know where it's going or exactly what it'll be about, but you know that it will be your new book. . .or is it the birth of the plot? Or the moment when the hero appears? Which is dearer, his appearance in your imagination or your first meeting with him on the stereo-screen?"

It's funny, thought Astor. *Funny. Now he's talking with me, with an extra person not forseen by the author. So this isn't the author's monolog. These are thoughts that are independent of the will of the person who created this old man. It's frightening. Not funny but frightening.*

"In the same way, I did not know who of the many characters I had begotten was the nearest and dearest. Not until recently. Not until the time came for me to part with the last one. Then I discovered that this last one was so close and so necessary to me that parting with him, watching him disappear, was not merely on a par with my own death, but was still more frightening. Afterward there would come an emptiness in which my life would continue without joy."

You're an idiot, Astor suddenly thought with unexpected cruelty. *You destroy the person you created and guided through life. Your hands tremble; they couldn't hurt a fly; while at the same time over there he's being dematerialized. Or not "there," here. It's happening here, in the studio. Just as it will to my Stor in a little while. We're both idiots. I myself didn't get a thing done either. I couldn't hack it. Not enough brains. What a piece of crap I am! I sit here and listen . . . .*

"I put myself into him," the old man continued in a monotone. "Or no, it was something a little better . . . and a little younger. I couldn't make him a young man—I've likely forgotten even how to daydream about that. He was the way I would like to be now if such a miracle were possible. Middleaged, no genius, no world celebrity, but simply a man honestly doing his work. Most important, I wanted to give him my pain, all the pain with which you create a character and with which you go away from him . . . ."

I don't understand him any more, Astor thought mechanically. *He's a writer himself and his character is a*

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writer, so . . . . But damn it, he's not a real person. Someone created him. It's all nonsense. It's like one matreshka *doll inside another.*

"Pardon me, but you haven't introduced yourself," said Astor.

"I'm a Real Writer," the old man said sadly.

"You said that already."

"I am a real Real Writer." Raving. . . .Astor rubbed his forehead and winced as if in pain. . . .And then it came to him. This was simply a human being! A human being, the same as himself! Just like Astor, he had crossed the forbidden boundary to save someone. Now there were two of them. Together they would think something up. Together they could still get something done.

"And your name?" he almost shouted.

"Castor Elamit," said the old man. Astor rose. Slowly he drew his leg back across the tree trunk, glanced at his hands and hid them in his pockets. It seemed as if the smoky haze of the wall had come out from behind the trees, had started to crawl toward them.

"Yes. . . ." said Astor. "Yes . . . That's a very funny . . . coincidence."

The old man did not answer.

"You . . . . are . . . . Castor Elamit. . . .Yes. But just who am I, then?"

Again the old man did not answer.

"And where did I come from?"

Silently the old man gazed at the gray wall that lost itself among the clouds. On the other side of the wall grew trees that existeed only in halves. Or they didn't "grow." They simply stood there, props. Only living things can grow. No proof, no explanation, was necessary. One had only to recall those tree halves to understand that the studio was over there, on the other side of the wall. And this, this was the world of humans.

"Do you want me to say it myself? All right. A biorobot. A nonfeedback anthropoid automaton, created in the image and likeness of his author. Exactly as I myself created my Stor. A bit younger and a bit . . . better. Right? And your first name, which you shortened by one letter. . . ."

Still, it was improbable. Especially once it had been said aloud. To think that you are only a robot is frightening. But when you say it aloud, it becomes simply an absurdity, and you have only to talk, talk, talk so that the sound of the words will mark out their absurdity with maximum vividness.

"So the world I have lived in up to this time is the world of scenery, sound effects, material images? The world of mockups and location footage? The world of nonexistent distances and altitudes? The world of childhoods that never were, of invented love affairs?" He stopped. Rika. His Rika and the impossibility of living for even one day without catching a glimpse of her . . . .

"So even Rika was a fiction?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes," said the old man. "I gave you what I myself had dreamed of having. It wouldn't matter exactly what she were like, so long as she was young, quite young, improbably young. . .just to look at here, just to look once a day. . . ."

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"I see." Astor's voice was calm. "Just to look at her once a day. So even that was yours. Nothing was my own. Yes, of course. I'm beginning to understand. Alien words. I said to her another man's stupid words. But what was my own? Was there anything?

"Astor," said the old man in the tone that one uses with small children, "From the moment you crossed the wall, you ceased to be mine."

"Well, please accept my heartfelt gratitude," said Astor. "Thank you for fifteen minutes of unowned existence, which has not even been enough time for me to become myself. But just why did you do it? You, better than anyone, should know that the loss of a biorobot will not go unnoticed, even if by some miracle I managed to work my way into the human world. They'll go looking for me, and I think they'll find me without much trouble. And then what? Dematerialization on the spot, without trial or testimony? Or what do you humans do with robots who have found free will?"

"Don't go on like that," the old man said. "Astor, don't."

"Forgive me," he replied. "Momentary curiousity. Anyway, I have to return. Tomorrow is the day of the experiment—my last experiment—which you thought up but which I am going to perform. Right?"

"Yes." The old man nodded. "It will be tomorrow. Before I came here, I finished the book."

"Thank you. I'll try to play it out with as much realism as possible."

"No need for the bravado, my lad. Don't try to look better than I. It's enough that you're younger."

"Better. . . ?" Astor heard himself laugh. "Why the hell did you have to drag me over to this side? Everything could have happened the way you willed it to tomorrow, but why did I have to learn that I am just—as we Real Writers say—a theatrical biorobot, a remote-controlled anthropoid automaton?"

"Yes," the old man said softly, almost as if talking to himself. "I suppose it was inevitable. I put into you not only my own soul but all the other qualities I thought I would have needed for absolute perfection, and yet somehow you turned out smaller and weaker than myself."

"Sorry," Astor said simply. "It's almost time for my tomorrow. If you can, please allow me to be . . . myself . . .for a bit longer."

"My lad—" The old man rose ponderously and stood up next to Astor. "—you are forgetting that the time of the . . ." He hesitated. ". . .the ones on the other side of the wall flows much more quickly than human time. Astor Elamit's tomorrow begins in twenty minutes."

"I see," said Astor. "I must hurry. I'm supposed to be at the Institute?"

"Of course." The old man smiled sadly. "It was the simplest exit."

"The barrier won't hold?"

"No, my lad. . . ."

"Meaning . . . . annihilation . . . .Damn it all, it's trite! And if I'm not mistaken you call yourself a physicist?"

"I had no time for anything else, Astor. You know that a Real Writer must not leave his book unfinished.

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And I . . . I am very old and sick, and the time has come when the automedic can find no way to arrest the development of my disease. I came to you while I still had the strength for it. I had to see about your future, and now I have done so. Farewell, my lad."

He lifted his small, light hands, and somewhat ceremoniously lay them on Astor's shoulders. They stood that way for a short while, and then Astor cautiously grasped the hands, squeezed them gently as if he were afraid of inflicting pain, and let them go.

"Well, I'll be going," he said.

"You haven't understood me, my lad. I'm the one who's going over there."

"Where?" Astor asked in confusion.

The old man nodded as if they say, "Over there, my child," and started to walk toward the wall, whose smoky haze arose behind the farthest trees.

"No!" cried Astor and barred his path. "No!"

The old man moved close and Astor grabbed him by the shoulder.

"There are less than twenty minutes left," the old man said calmly. "I am not merely a physicist but one of those who created the Writers' Union studio, who raised its wall and programmed its robots. As a result, I was able to upset the focus of the cameras and the observing apparatus. Because of this, I enabled you to come out here and when I return in your place, it will not be noticed. But the general course of action in my book has already been dictated and it is not possible to change it. Someone has to return and play it out to the end."

"It will be me," declared Astor. "And don't make me use force."

"Yes, I made you younger and stronger than I." The old man raised his head and looked straight into Astor's eyes. "But I am a man, and you cannot walk my road."

He shook off Astor's hands and walked toward the wall, holding himself as erect as possible. Astor watched him go, not daring to move from the spot. His thoughts were muddled; one contested with another and the result was a shapeless morass. The natural argument, the unanswerable argument that would give Astor the right to halt the old man, would not crystallize. But Astor felt with all his being that he did have such a right; only its basis eluded him. The old man had already reached the last row of trees. He looked back and called loudly, "Farewell, Astor Elamit!"

And Astor remembered. "Stop!" he shouted and rushed toward the old man. "I can't let you go in my place; I still have my Stor."

The old man looked at him with surprise.

"Now I understand why I didn't find him here," Astor continued. "This is the world of humans, and he is only a biorobot. So he's over there, on the territory of the studio, and I'm going back to find him. He's the only thing I've got."

"No," said the old man, "you have not got your Stor. He also is mine, just like the childhood you remember, the laws of physics you use, like your need to see Rika . . . he is not yours."

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"True. Everything is your idea. Even Stor. You willed it and so I played Real Writer and created living people. But the pain I felt for him was mine. Pain belongs to the loser, not the creator."

"What you feel is only the echo of the pain I suffered over you."

"To hell with it if it wasn't mine! Rake in everything for yourself! Everything! There's no time to bargain. You can have everything that was. But what will be, the few minutes that remain before the explosion, are mine. What will you do for Stor if you go?"

"Nothing," the old man said calmly.

"But *I'll* do something! Everything I can. I'll find him. . . ."

"You will not find him because he does not exist to be found. The difference between you and Stor is that you are a material character and he is not. He lives only on paper and in your imagination."

"So," Astor said slowly. "The last *matreshka* doll turns out to be empty. Nothing inside. But how do you live in this world, in any world, if there's nothing inside?"

"My lad, it has not yet been an hour since you became a real person, but everything that you have experienced in that time is yours. And the future, after I go, is also yours. I leave you my name and my right to use the Union studio. You do not yet have your Stor. But you can create him."

Shaken, Astor remained silent.

"But if you do decide to save this Stor, your Stor, remember this: A theatrical biorobot cannot cross the boundary into the human world. The order simply would not be passed by the cybereditors who review all the material as it reaches the studio. And if by some blunder they did let it pass, no biorobot would accept such an order—he wouldn't obey it. That is how they are programmed."

"But what about me?" Astor asked in confusion.

"Remember where you were going. You wanted to get not to the human world but to a world of imaginary characters. You wanted to meet not your creator but your own creation. If human beings had reviewed the text of my last transmission, they like as not would have caught onto my trick. But I managed to fool the computers. Remember, this is the only way out and I found it only because I myself designed and created the studio's barrier zone. It is useless for a human being to cross the boundary. The cyberobservers would not allow him to meet a single biorobot. Remember this one maneuver. You'll manage to upset the focusing because I put into you the whole complex of knowledge that I had mastered—after all, mornings you too were just a physicist."

Astor nodded.

"And don't hurry. Don't mess it up. Don't feel it's something you have to do. Fashion your Stor only with love and pain. Those are the only true ingredients; all the rest is unreal. Don't value him only because he is yours. He must be worth going after. And when you know that he is really worth that, you will know how to save him."

For a while longer they stood silently, simply looking at one another. Then the old man stepped

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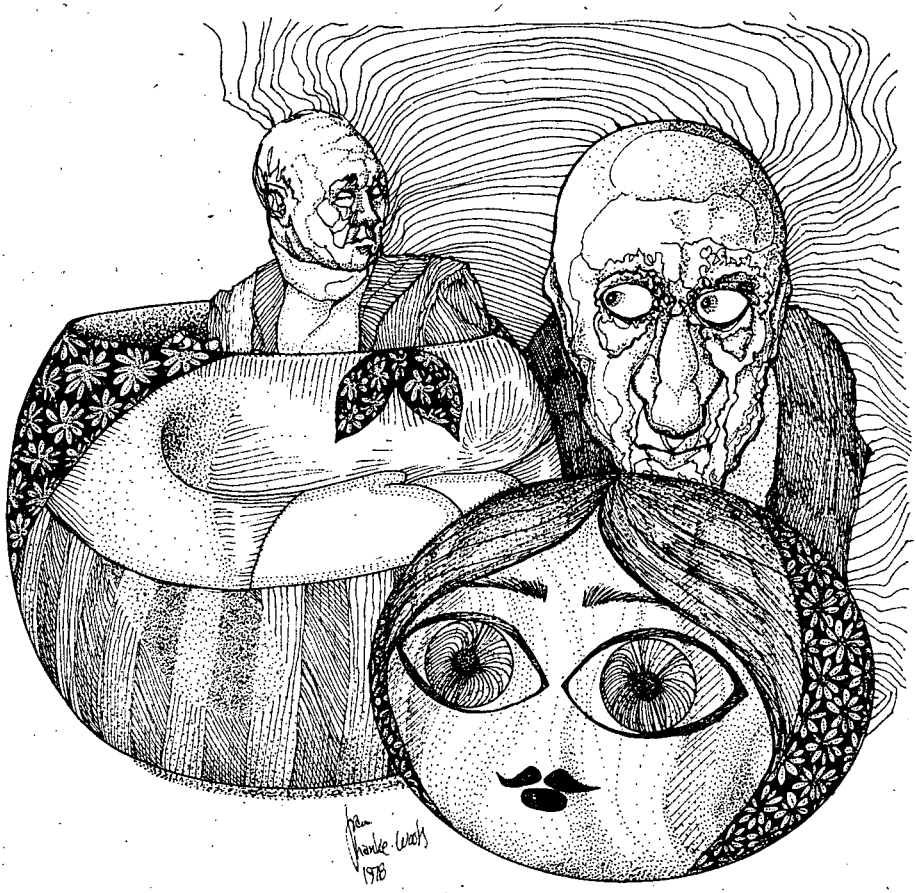
forward and disappeared into the smoky depth of the wall.

Astor waited. The hidden rustlings of the evening forest surrounded him and he strained with all his might to catch a whisper of what was happening on the other side of the wall. No hint came, no clue. Still Astor waited. Then a strange memory gently surfaced from his subconsicous: On the other side the forest never made noise. . . .! He swayed—as if the recollection had given him a light interior shove—as if the recollection had given him a light interior shove—and started to walk away. He walked faster and faster, without looking back. For all his human life that place was so impressed on his memory that he knew he could find it immediately and without mistake when the time came to return. ★



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THE DEVIL AND ALL HER WORKS...

BY JOR JENNINGS

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Why should the devil care what *we* think he (she) is like?

VIBRANT ANIMAL magnetism made the Senator seem much younger than his forty-four years. Following the Secret Service agents who bulldozed a path for him through the crowd, he grabbed the hands reaching out to him.

Then, wonder of wonders, he leaned over the railing and reached out toward me! For one fantastic moment the blue eyes under that famous thatch of light brown hair (gray in real life) seemed to be on me, taking me in. Then he reached past my outstretched arm, pressed the hand of the man behind me, that of the man next to him, and the next. Everyone's but mine.

And I had driven since dawn for a glimpse of my idol!

At least I had been able to hear his speech over outside loudspeakers (I arrived too late to get into the auditorium). A crummy speech it was, too, full of catchy phrases that got roars of applause, but when it was all over and you asked yourself "What exactly did he say?" you couldn't remember a thing.

Did I want a man like that, an empty-headed crowd-pleaser, to be *my* next president?

Not on your life! Right then and there I decided to get even with him for ignoring me. But how could an eighteen-year-old State College student get even with one of the richest, most powerful men in the country?

I would just have to find a way.

* * *

"Medicine in the middle ages," my anthropology teacher said, "was a matter of strange nostrums that killed as often as they cured, and what cures there were could be laid to the placebo effect. Is it therefore not true that medical intervention can save lives? We now know it can, once the basic laws of physiology are known. Witchcraft is today in the same state that medical science was in during the Middle Ages. Is magical intervention therefore impossible? Or will it become possible, once the basic laws of the universe are known? How many of you have read Castaneda? Come now, someone must have, there's one or two in every class. Aha, I thought so. What did you think—"

After class I joined the throng at his lectern, and when the bell rang and the next class began to file in, I followed him to his office with the other students whose questions were still unanswered. Most were variations of "Do you really think witchcraft is possible?" and his answers were variations of "Were you ever hypnotized? Did you ever have a telepathic experience? How do you explain that by the known laws of modern science?"

For a half hour Doctor Manson patiently answered and re-answered their questions while I fidgeted in a corner, thinking that this was the story of my life, to be one of a crowd at the feet of an authority symbol who pays attention to everyone but me.

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What was I doing there anyway? Was it possible that this chubby little pink-faced man, who had for some reason chosen to wear a lilac shirt and a purple paisley tie with a tan and green plaid suit, could tell me anything that would make a difference in my life, anything that I wanted to know?

Finally when the last of my fellow students left and Doctor Manson looked at me and said, "Nell Wills, isn't that right?" I was so flattered to find he knew my name that all the subtle lead-ins I had been trying to compose vanished from my mind.

"I'll get right to the point," I said when I couldn't think of anything else to say. "I want to study witchcraft. Where do I sign up?"

"I wish I knew, I'd study it myself. You need an adept, a master, someone who can teach you. Unfortunately, all the adepts I've ever had a chance to investigate turned out to be frauds."

"If Uri Geller can do what he does, there must be others—"

"If that's the kind of magic you want to learn, I can teach you myself," said Doctor Manson, reaching toward me. I braced myself for a pass, but all he did was to pull an enormous silk flower out of my ear. "Not that I've actually investigated Geller myself," he went on, "but it does seem curious that all his so-called psychic feats can be duplicated by any stage magician using ordinary legerdemain."

With a few quick strokes he turned the huge flower into a pencil-sized cylinder, tucked it up his sleeve, and explained, "I worked my way through college doing this. However, I don't think you want to waste your life pulling artificial flowers out of the ears of pretty co-eds. You want to cast love spells, put a hex on the man who jilted you, something of that sort."

I smiled at him sweetly. If he only knew!

"I wish I could help you but I can't," Doctor Manson went on. "Maybe the problem is that sorcery isn't really on a scientific basis yet. Somebody has to create one. And it might as well be us. With this in mind, some of my fellow faculty members and I have gotten together to form a coven. You're welcome to join if you like."

The idea of me, a mere freshman, joining a coven of college professors was overwhelming. "Uh—I'm not sure I would be any good."

"Nonsense. Any blue-eyed redhead with a gorgeous tan has to be a natural-born witch! The combination doesn't occur in nature."

There was a moment of silence while I wondered who he was talking about. I have green eyes, myself.

Then he said, "Besides, don't you think most of the students who came in here wanted to study witchcraft? But you were the only one who said so. The first requirement for a witch is that she have guts enough to say, 'I want to study witchcraft.' You've read Castaneda of course?"

Not only had I not read Castaneda Of Course, I didn't even know who he was.

Doctor Manson jumped up and pulled paperbacks down from his bookshelves. When he had an arm-

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ful, he turned to me with a sudden thought. "Are you one of those young girls who reads six books a day, or is one a week more like it, and then only under duress?"

I had to admit I was the second type.

Doctor Manson handed me one book and put the rest back. "Everything Castaneda has to say, he says in *Journey to Ixtlan*. Read that. Don't waste your time with Batty, or whatever his name is; you know, the preposterous tale of the girl who must have been possessed by the Devil since she used naughty words, masturbated, wet her pants, and—we mustn't forget the most important sign of all!—she had bad breath! If that's what the author thinks evil is, can you imagine what his childhood must have been like? No, you can't, can you? You haven't read Freud. Not that I would attribute everyone's problems to faulty toilet training, but in this case . . . never-mind. Stick with Carlito. He'll tell you where it's at. God, I wish I could study with Don Juan! Well, what about the coven? Tonight's our esbat, our weekly meeting. Can I pick you up around, say, sevenish?"

"Uh—it sounds interesting." Still, I couldn't understand what a bunch of college professors would want with a freshman, an eighteen-year-old girl. Wait! Wasn't there something about naked virgins? "But if you're looking for someone to serve as an alter, I think I ought to tell you—"

"No! Oh, God! Is that what you . . . oh, no!" Doctor Manson hid his very red face in his hands. "It's not that sort of, I mean, it's really very respectable. Jesus! Would I ask you if—look, I know you're a nice girl. . . ."

I decided not to disillusion him.

"What we do is more . . . well, learning how to control our lives so our lives won't control us, that sort of thing," Manson said, getting himself in hand. "For instance, I suffer from a rare form of color blindness, tritanopia. It has embarrassed me all my life, ever since my kindergarten teacher bawled me out for painting a picture with a green sky and blue grass. I honestly couldn't tell the difference, and yet she accused me of being a nonconformist! Can you believe it? For most of us, the worst name we can call someone is—well, I don't want to say it now; her worst was 'nonconformist.' Anyway, I joined the coven because I wanted to learn how to tell colors with my fingers, so—like, I could match up my suits and ties, people wouldn't stare when I came into a room, that sort of thing.

"The Russians are really into it, but in this country, well, the coven group was the only one that didn't make me feel silly. Then, do you know what happened? I was getting some results but when I'd try a different set of yarns, I couldn't tell the colors apart any more. Colors differ so much from dye-lot to dye-lot, you see, and the sense of touch involves a whole different set of parameters. I'm still working it out. But anyway. What I started to tell you is that all of a sudden it no longer mattered. I mean, I happen to think this tie goes very well with this suit. If you don't agree, that's *your* problem, not mine. Do you

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see what I mean? *That's* what witchcraft has done for me."

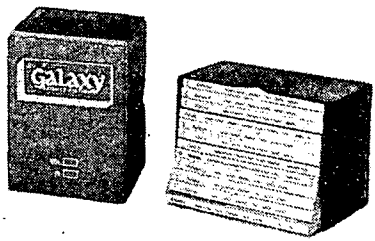
I managed to make some sympathetic noises although it was hard to sympathize with someone who wanted to get even with his kindergarten teacher when the man I wanted to get even with had just been elected President of the United States.

After that I *had* to visit Doctor Manson's coven—his enthusiasm wouldn't let me say no. And the coven became the family I never had.

Not that I don't have a family at home. There's Mom, and Dad, and me, and Christy. We're what is called a nuclear family. The only time we talk is when we can't agree on which television show to watch—unless you count as talking the hours Mom spends in comparing me to Christy. For my own good, of course. Christy's the good little sister, I'm the big bad one, you see? Like the time Mom found the diaphragm in my dresser. She didn't even think of looking through Christy's drawers. You see?

As I said, the coven became the family I never had. Its grandmaster and most famous member was octogenarian Frederick R. Birch, coauthor of *Reproductive Behavior*, every undergraduate's favorite scientific treatise. If you liked *The Decameron*, you'll love Dodge and Birch. Everyone else called him Fred. I called him Uncle Fred, partly out of respect for his age and fame but mostly because he liked to pat young girls. When he put his arm around me, I called him Uncle Fred to remind him of how much patting I was willing to put up with.

THIS SPACE RESERVED FOR GALAXY



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Uncle Fred was so much our guiding light, we often referred to ourselves as the Fred Birch Society.

Whether or not Uncle Fred actually cast love spells on pretty co-eds in Psych. 150, as he claimed, or conjured up succubi to keep him amused while he ran his control groups, the projects he arranged for the coven were chaste enough. Mostly we did yoga exercises. We learned how to relax in incredible positions, how to visualize a purple sphere and watch it turn orange, and eventually we graduated to out-of-body experiences. Leaving his body behind, the coven member chosen for the experiment would drift into the next room, note the objects that were arranged on a tray, then return and report. The scientists among us wanted to be sure we were really out of our bodies and not simply imagining the experience.

After a few nights of this, one of the scientists observed that we were not really controlling for mental telepathy. The subject might be reading the mind of the person who had arranged the tray. Not that we would suspect a fellow witch of deliberately lying about her experiences. We just wanted to be sure. After that we had the out-of-body subject visit addresses selected at random from the telephone book until she found someone at home. Then she would return to report the objects she had seen on the coffee table. The householder was then telephoned for confirmation. A surprisingly highly percentage of householders were willing to cooperate, once they were told that a scientific research group at the College wanted to know what was on their living-room coffee table.

We never told them we were a witches' coven.

Several years later we did some witches' ceremonies after Bea and Henry Frankenheimer completed their bomb shelter, where we started holding meetings. Made of concrete sprayed onto a balloon, the shelter was egg-shaped for maximum pressure resistance. Bea had painted the rough, round ceiling with cave-art Irish elk, woolly mammoths and other extinct beasts. Heaps of Peruvian blankets made comfortable seats out of chests full of food and bottled water, "hope chests" Bea called them. Batik hangings curtained off the chemical toilet.

The egg buried in the ground, the primitive art, and the doomed-world foreboding that all bomb shelters invoke combined to put us in the mood for occult and mystical experiences. The mood was hard to sustain, however. We felt nervous and self-conscious calling up demon gods of yore with the help of what little fire and incense the shelter's air-conditioning system could handle. Invariably someone would start giggling or toss off a witticism that got everyone else giggling, and any power our combined minds had managed to generate vanished in the laughter. Antiquated rituals seemed irrelevant, somehow. With relief we went back to our out-of-body experiments.

The coven's activities seemed harmless enough, except for the fact that I kept having dreams. Over and over it was the same dream, with minor variations. Our newly elected president, looking handsome,

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healthy and altogether heroic in jodphurs, riding boots and a white shirt with most of the buttons torn off, is tied to a stake in a night-time forest. Around him dance baleful, shrieking hags, adding more logs to the pile at his feet. Something is coming up behind me, a tower of fire radiating absolute evil, I guess. I don't dare turn around to look.

Somehow I am handed a burning brand. The Devil has picked me—me, of all people!—to light the fire that will destroy the arch enemy of all that is evil, the President of the United States. I do my best, but the wood—mossy, dew-wet logs from the forest floor—will not catch; no Girl Scout, I need a gas jet, or at least a can of lighter fluid, to start a fire. Finally an impatient witch snatches the brand and pushes me away, out of the circle of dancing witches. I am not wicked enough, it seems; so I am rejected, and I wake up.

However innocent, harmless, and even ineffectual, the coven may appear to be, it is still a witches' coven and it ties me to the forces of evil, so the dream seemed to be telling me. Yet how could I give up the best friends I had ever known? Or the feeling that a presidential candidate who ignores a tired, untidy teen-ager—who drove all day to see him—and shakes hands only with prosperous-looking men in business suits, does not deserve to occupy the White House? If only my coven would teach me some spells so I could put a hex on him! Maybe some painful, chronic disease. . . .

"When are we going to get into spells?" I asked Don Manson soon after I joined the coven.

"You can get into spells whenever you want to, Nell. It's a free country," Don replied rather impatiently.

"Nell's new here. Maybe she doesn't know our system," Fred Birch said, coming up between us and putting a friendly arm around each of us.

"What system, Uncle Fred?" I asked, extracting his hand from my jeans pocket and holding it firmly.

"The problem is, none of us knows any reliable spells. Oh, there are spells given in the classics on witchcraft, which generally suffer from incomplete directions or call for European herbs, plants no one here would recognize if they did happen to sprout on campus. Or they recommend procedures impractical for modern apartment dwellers, such as stuffing a sheep's heart up one's chimney. Be that as it may. Whenever one of us tries a spell, he reports everything he does and the outcome, whether or not he got any result at all, not necessarily the desired one, in the coven Grimoire, or spellbook." Uncle Fred looked around. "Where the hell is the Grimoire? It's supposed to be brought to all the meetings."

Where was the Grimoire, everyone wondered. After five or six minutes of group mutterings, Harry Box, the meteorologist, thought he might have left it in the trunk of his car, and went out to look. Sure enough, the Grimoire had been in Box's trunk since last summer. No one had missed it. The Grimoire turned out to be one of those books of blank pages bound in gold-stamped artificial leather that you

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can buy in most bookstores. All of the pages were still blank.

"Witches, this won't do!" said Uncle Fred. "We're supposed to be expanding the frontiers of occult knowledge in all sorts of forbidden directions, yet none of you has reported a spell, successful or otherwise. What do you want to do, turn into yogis by default? Hasn't anyone tried a spell?"

After a silence Box confessed, "I tried a Navaho rain chant last summer, during the drought."

"Oh, that's what brought on the thunderstorm!" someone joked.

"The thunderstorm was two days later. Lightning set brush fires all over the county. It was dramatic enough that way, but the rain was, maybe, one drop per square centimeter. Officially it was not enough to measure. I was going to write it up anyway—that's why I took the Grimoire home—but then . . . well, nobody else had written up anything, and . . . I mean, if there hadn't been any rain at all, or if there had been some measurable amount, but how can you write up a report when there is some rain, but not enough to measure?" Box wondered.

"Especially when you have to despoil a virgin blank book to do it," said Harriet Who. (By changing her last name to Who, Harriet renounced both her ex-husband's and her father's last names and assumed "the identity crisis of modern woman," as she explained it.)

"This virgin cost the coven. . .um, two dollars and ninety-eight cents," said Uncle Fred, looking at the flyleaf. "Despoil her, Harry. That is, if you still have your notes. And who knows? If enough of you follow suit, I may be tempted to reveal my experiments with rhinocerous horn."

The Grimoire was soon filled and a second purchased. Many reports were positive in that the desired outcome had occurred—most likely by coincidence, the authors invariably observed. The spells were all kindly in intent, though. The most malignant was a curse on tomato hornworms. Not one would do for giving the President a painful, chronic disease.

So I carved a statue of the President out of an old Christmas candle and stuck pins in it for a while one night. The next morning I read in *Time* that he already had a chronic and a painful disease. One of each. He had had them for years. So much for black magic. No, I didn't write *that* one up for the coven Grimoire!

Hexing did not seem to work for me, but I got pretty good at the out-of-body stuff, good enough to appear to fourteen firemen pinned down by crossfire during the race riots of the following summer and lead them to safety through back alleys and abandoned buildings I had previously scouted out. This was not a particularly brave thing to do. Being disembodied, I was never in any danger myself. Still, I think it was a *nice* thing to do, to save fourteen firemen from "meeting their Maker," as the saying goes. Witchcraft can't be all bad, can it, if you can use the skills you learn in your coven to save human lives?

Later Uncle Fred picked me to help out the coven, but I don't know whether he did so because I

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was so good at the out-of-body bit or because I already knew Charlie Crane.

Absolutely the best-looking man I have ever met in my whole life, he came out of the library with me at closing time, introduced himself, mentioned chemical engineering, and insisted on walking me back to the dorm. It was a dark night lit by flashes of lightning, with a hint of storm on the gusty wind. At every gust and flash he put his arm around me in case I might be frightened; and every time he put his arm around me, I laughed and pushed him away.

That's how I found out he was wearing a shoulder holster under his jacket.

Between passes Charlie entertained me with stories about all the girls who had been raped and/or murdered on campus in the last ten years. Moral: I was lucky to have his protection.

Well, the campus is in the old part of town, surrounded on three sides by the decaying neighborhoods that had erupted into violence the previous summer. We do have more than our share of crime: maybe thirty sex-crime victims in the last ten years out of a total student population of fifteen thousand a year. I was about as likely to be raped and murdered on the average walk as I was to be struck by that distant lightning. Chalk up one benefit of hanging around with scientists: I now go by probabilities.

The time to worry, mother always told me, is when the lightning and thunder come close together. That seemed the case with Charlie. The gun under his coat, the obses-

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sion with rape and murder. . . .

The funny thing is, all he would have had to say was "please." Now, I may be the black sheep of the family, but I'm not promiscuous. I never sleep with a guy on the first date. I don't feel like it with someone I hardly know. For Charlie I would have made an exception, he was that good-looking.

Only I'm not about to be pushed around by anyone, no matter how good-looking. And it seemed as though Charlie wouldn't say "please"—he'd say, "You have to. I have a gun." So when what he really said was, "I'm taking you out tomorrow night. Where do you want to go?" I said I had to write a term paper. That left "Friday night?" and "Any time Saturday or Sunday?"

Running out of excuses, I said there was another man in my life, which I guess was true.

The President.

Whenever I went out with anyone, I kept thinking that I was wasting my time by having fun when I ought to be getting even with *him*.

So anyway, was I surprised when Charlie showed up at the next esbat with Harriet Who! I mean, Charlie is the best-looking man in the universe, now that Che Guevarra is dead. And Harriet is a short, dumpy, middle-aged woman with one topic of conversation: how the male-dominated world is unfair to women. If you talk about music, she'll demand to know why there aren't more female composers and conductors. And I agree with her. Whole-heartedly. I just couldn't understand why Harriet would appeal to Charlie Crane.

And vice versa. Obviously Harriet was really gone on Charlie.

"But I mean, he's obsessed with it," I explained to Uncle Fred after the meeting. "He knows the names, the dates, how the victim was dressed, everything.

"If he's that interested in crime, it might be because he's in law enforcement," Uncle Fred suggested.

"Charlie? He's a grad student in chemical engineering," I said, even as the light dawned. Grad students do not wear shoulder holsters.

"Follow him, Nell. I'll watch your body." One of Uncle Fred's rules for the coven was that no one could undertake an out-of-body experience without what he called a "baby-sitter" watching the body.

"You're the last person I'd want watching my body," I joked in all seriousness.

"Dear Nell. Sweet Nell. Adorable Nell. Haven't you learned yet that barking dogs don't bite? Your virginity, or what's left of it, is safe with me, alas. Now be off with you."

Wondering why I would be willing to sleep with Charlie just because he was good-looking and not with Uncle Fred, whom I knew and loved, I slipped my mortal, fleshy and admittedly rather attractive body to hover, most of the night, over Harriet's apartment house. Finally Charlie emerged and went to a telephone booth in a gas station on the corner. And that's when I learned. . . .

It was the F. B. I., no less, that was trying to infiltrate our collegiate coven.

So much for my undergraduate rape fantasies.

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Uncle Fred and I decided not to tell the others. Instead, we let Charlie come to all the meetings he liked. After falling asleep twice in a row, Charlie tried to stir up some excitement, and we had to tell him that, while we agreed that Africa was as advanced in magic as any continent, we couldn't see how getting in touch with the local chapter of the Black Panthers would further our aims, or theirs.

Finally, during one interminable ESP experiment, Charlie whispered to me, "You don't really believe in this, do you?" and I was bored enough to whisper back, "No, I'm—*shhhh*!" and then, right in his ear, "I'm a secret agent for the F.B.I." Charlie gave me a long look. I gave him my sweetest smile.

And we never saw Charlie again.

With the help of Harriet, who had just had her opinion of men confirmed, we put the pieces together. Judging by the sweet nothings Charlie had whispered in her ear, the F.B.I. was not investigating the Devil and all of his works.

It was interested only in the race riot of the preceding summer. Inflation, unemployment and racial discrimination were not adequate reasons for rioting to the government's way of thinking. There had to be a secret conspiracy of Communists behind it all. The plotting must be centered in the college surrounded on three sides by ghetto, right? I mean, you wouldn't expect mere negroes to take to Communism all by themselves!

We had to hand it to Charlie, though. It's not every man who is able to whisper, "But don't you people know *any* of the black activists in the city?" when he's in like Flynn.

Suddenly it was the spring of my senior year, and a lot of students were cutting classes, demonstrating, holding group camp-outs in the Administration Building and setting fire to library wastebaskets to protest the war in Nambia. Then Marie Murphy was killed by a tear-gas shell, and the whole student body went crazy.

Except me.

Not that I didn't understand how they felt. If I were a man, I wouldn't want to have to fight, and maybe die, for some fat old monarch who walks to his throne on the necks of his crouching subjects just because the rebels call themselves Socialists!

And if defoliating the jungle really does destroy the last known habitat of the persimmon tree frog, then the Air Force should not do it. What I didn't understand was how closing the college would bring Marie back, or help end the war. And the food-processing firm I work for had promised me a job with their branch in Thailand just as soon as I got my B.A. It was beginning to look like I would never graduate.

On May first the soldiers came. No, it wasn't the National Guard. They went to other colleges, not ours. We got troops from the army base at Pierson's Point. They marched around the campus in long columns, two abreast, double-time, with fixed bayonets; or they stood around in the rain in groups of two or three, looking bored and annoyed. After a couple of days of

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this, most of the students went back to their classes. There didn't seem to be anything else to do.

About that time we discovered that all the professors in the coven, except Don Manson, had had their telephones tapped. And without a court order! Don made a lot of jokes about being overlooked, but we could tell he was really hurt.

As things settled down again, I had another dream. Once more I was in the night-time forest, dancing with other witches around our President, who was tied to a stake in a clearing. Once more the power of evil approached me from behind, a burning brand was handed me, and the wood refused to light. About to give up in frustration, I suddenly thought, "Hey, wait a minute! This is *my* dream. The whole thing is taking place in *my* mind. All I have to do is *want* that wood to light and it will burst into flame!"

Behind me, Satan said with a soft chuckle, "Precisely."

I applied the brand again. Fire blazed up, and what became of the President I do not know; it seemed more important to turn around and look at Satan. That, I must admit, was a surprise.

Forget everything you've ever heard about goatish figures with horns and cloven hooves. Satan was—is—a beautiful young woman. Chestnut hair, sparkling in the firelight, rippled to her waist. Mounds of pale breast, bared not quite to the nipple, showed in the vee neck of her black-velvet jumpsuit. In face and figure she looks a lot like me. She also looks a lot better than me. She's the image I almost see in the mirror when I'm getting ready to go out, the face and figure I compare myself with when I realize that something's missing, that something's not quite right. Satan is the Ultimate Me.

"Is the Devil a boy or a girl?" I asked at the next esbat, already knowing the answer of course. I just wanted to see whether anyone else did.

"The Devil being a projection of one's unrecognized unconscious contents," said Uncle Fred, "I suppose it would be the same sex as oneself. Unless, of course, the contents are sexual, in which case one might prefer an opposite-sex Devil. On the other hand, a homosexual might prefer . . . or would he? Witches, do any of you know whether a fag would conjure up a succubus or an incubus?"

"If succubuses represent the homosexual's unconscious sexuality, he must not be aware of his orientation, in which case how would you operationally define homosexuality?" said Henry Frankenheimer.

Harriet objected to the term "fag."

Uncle Fred objected to "succubuses." "The correct plural of succubus is succubi," he informed us.

"I was speaking English, not Latin," said Henry.

The coven would go on all night arguing about the correct plural of succubus if no one stopped it. "Hey, look!" I shouted. "There was this serpent in the Garden of Eden, the one that tempted Eve. What was that?"

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"A green tree python?" Uncle Fred guessed.

"Not a constrictor, surely. A viper. I rather fancy the Gabon viper, myself," said Box, who raised snakes as a hobby.

"Look. The serpent talked to Eve. And snakes can't talk," I said, feeling very clever. But they didn't let me feel clever for long.

"Snakes in the Garden of Eden could talk in the same way that dragons can breathe fire. Fairy-tale animals can do anything the author likes," said Uncle Fred.

"That's not a fairy tale, it's the Bible!"

"Nell, I happen to believe in evolution. If you don't, I'll respect your beliefs, but I'm not going to argue with you," Uncle Fred said gently.

"I believe in evolution too, of course, but—"

"Then what the hell are we talking about?" said Uncle Fred.

It was hard to tell at that point. "The Devil?" I guessed, as I became aware of a gap a mile wide between my home-town Sunday school and my college education. On the far side stood Jesus, gentle, mild, welcoming the little children. I was on the opposite shore with the trilobites, dinosaurs, woolly mammoths and "Chuck baby," as my Biology 100 teacher had called the great Darwin. Was there no bridge back to Jesus?

Not for a witch in a coven, there wasn't.

I had made my choice. Not that I'd ever had anything to lose. After all, I was the black sheep of the family to begin with. I think I'd rather go to Hell, anyway. All the most interesting people will be there.

"All right, let's talk about the Devil," said Uncle Fred. "The first thing you need to know about the Devil is that there's no such thing. Now. What else would you like to know?"

"Uh . . . but there's this myth of the Devil. You know, the fellow with horns and cloven hooves—"

"And oversized genitals?" Uncle Fred suggested.

"That may be the projection of *your* unconscious!" I retorted.

"That's Pan," Don had said at the same time. "Seriously, Nell," he went on when the laughter died down, "the horned diety, half man, half animal, was originally the classic nature god, Pan. When Christianity began its conquest of the European mind, it had to do something with all the local gods. Many became saints in the Catholic pantheon. Others, like Pan, just didn't fit and were said to be devils or evil spirits. Dealing with them would condemn your immortal soul to everlasting torture, the early Christians said. That was undoubtedly the worst threat they could think of. Join the Christian Church or rot in Hell forever! Good propaganda, I suppose. Anyway, it worked. That doesn't mean we have to believe it. And, I mean, really! What sort of god would damn anyone, anyone in the world, to everlasting torment? He would have to be worse than the demons who actually did the torture, wouldn't he? If God were really like that, I don't think I'd want to cooperate."

"And when you think about what Pan really represents," said Uncle

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Fred. "Half man, half animal—the perfect symbol for the fusion of human nature with the animal instincts. No wonder the Christian Church wanted to repress—"

"I don't know why you keep talking about Pan when Satan really was Aradia," Harriet interrupted. "Look at the facts! In the Middle Ages nine out of ten convicted witches were women. And whom did they worship? Aradia! Come fly through the air, on your broomstick if you must, without it if you can. On, through the air! To the planets! To the galaxies! And who will help you get there? Aradia, the Great. The power of nature expressed as female. The god (I don't accept goddess, it's a diminutive) of half the world, the world of woman!

"But the Christian Church couldn't let women identify with any kind of power. Oh, no, we weren't allowed an aspect of the divine that we could relate to, oh, no! The church fathers were afraid of us, you see. They made it so that the only relationship we could have with the divine was a sexual one. We could relate to the church as the Bride of Christ, or to Mary as the Mother of God, but we could not *be* Christ, we could not *be* God. Direct identification with the divine was reserved for males."

"I can't buy that, Harriet. I can't believe the church fathers really intended to suppress women when they ignored the feminine aspects of the divine," Don said. "Isn't it more likely that they were children of their time—"

Harriet interrupted him with, "Oh, yeah? Then I suppose you can't believe that George Washington and his crew really intended to suppress women when they denied them the right to vote, either?"

We had invoked Aradia several times during our traditional witchcraft exercises, but no one had explained to me who she was and I hadn't thought to ask. Now I wondered whether it was Aradia I had seen in my dream.

"If the Devil doesn't exist, what about Aradia?" I asked Henry Frankenheimer, who happened to be standing within whispering distance.

"Depends on what you mean by 'exist,'" Henry said carefully, and added the only fact he was sure of: "Neither one came when we called."

"I ask for bread and you give me a stone!" I shouted, which shows how upset I was. Normally I avoid such clichés.

"What did I *do*?" Henry asked, looking bewildered.

"If you don't want any more stones, Nell, why don't you tell us what's really bothering you? I can't believe it's metaphysics," said Uncle Fred, coming close but for once not putting his arm around me. He looked as though he were really concerned.

What could I say? Could I tell them: I had this dream, see, and in it some dark power, Satan or Aradia, gave me the responsibility for doing in the President of the United States? Now I want to know if I really ought to? No, I couldn't say that. What I actually said was, "I've been with the coven for almost four years, and really, I love you all. I've loved every minute of it. Only now that I'm about to

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graduate, I'd like to know before I go away if dabbling in witchcraft has imperiled my immortal soul. And don't you dare ask me to operationally define 'soul' or I'll make a waxen image of you and stick pins in it!''

Looking Uncle Fred in both eyes, I waited the necessary moment and then added, ''. . . and guess where I'm going to stick the pins!''

''Umm, yes. We'll miss you, Nell. The coven won't be the same without you. In fact,'' said Uncle Fred, ''there's a plot afoot, to which I am not a party, to talk you into graduate school. But you never were a student. You need to be out in the world, doing things. Our loss is the world's gain. So much for that.

''To answer your legitimate, urgent and vital question. There is some scientific evidence to support a belief in life after death, namely, the recollections of medical patients who were revived after all vital signs ceased. Some seventeen per cent of them remember extremely pleasant out-of-body experiences; the rest remember nothing, not unexpectedly; they were unconscious at the time. Do the memories of the few who remember something prove life after death, Heaven even, or only the powers of the human imagination? Perhaps they prove whichever hypothesis you want to believe. At any rate, there is *no scientific evidence at all* to support a belief in Hell. None at all. The most parsimonious explanation is that Hell is a myth invented by the church to scare the peasants into behaving themselves.

''The coven did spend the first year of its existence discussing first causes. Maybe we should have written up the Minutes and let you see them. About all we could agree on was that in view of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, there had to be another Force, a creative organizing Force, opposing the universal decay of energy in order to explain the universe. To avoid mental images of white-bearded old men sitting on clouds, we decided to call our creative force 'Anti-entropy.' God, if you like, is Anti-entropy. Among other things, no doubt.

''Now, what else would you like to know? What else would you like to know that an eighty-year-old physiological psychologist can tell you? One with many awards and publications behind him. Along with almost all of his life. And when St. Peter calls me up, if that old myth is true, which I doubt, and says, 'Who are you, that you think you can enter the Gates of Heaven?' shall I say, 'I'm *the* Fred Birch?' Or shall I say, rather, 'Hell, I'm just a dirty old man,' and will the gates of Heaven then open wide?

''Actually, what I'm really angling for is to be reincarnated as a dolphin. The dolphins would understand me as the Americans never have. So, my dear Nell, if there is anything you want to know that an eighty-year-old physiological psychologist who has known sin can tell you, be sure to ask. Except that I don't think there is. I think that what you really want to know is similar to what I gave up worrying about sixty years ago. The questions are . . . horribly important, there's no doubt about that. But scientifically they're meaningless. There's

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no way to find the answers. Isn't that so?"

"Uh . . . I don't know. . . ."

"Of course you don't. The difference between what is known, what can be known and what can never be known is not taught at the undergraduate level," Uncle Fred said wittily. It seemed as though everyone laughed but me.

I decided to go ahead and murder the President, and to Hell with them all!

* * *

At some point in my college career I had spent the better part of a night being driven through the countryside by a junior I hardly knew while his roommate told a girl I hardly knew why Croatia should be free. The backseat Croatian was Bela Benjac.

Bela Benjac began receiving visits from a numinous figure dressed in shimmering white, with a suggestion of wings behind the bared shoulders and long chestnut hair emitting a faint, halo-like glow. Your disembodied self does not have to resemble the body you left behind. You can appear as anything you choose. So naturally I chose to look like Satan. Wouldn't you if you were a girl?

The first time I showed up, Bela buried his head under the covers and muttered, "What did I do this time?" It turned out that I was not his first incorporeal visitor. I was only the first to be kind to him. Most of his hallucinations were nameless horrors that ripped up his spirit with bloody talons and, frankly, I don't see how the poor boy could stand it. He really needed psychiatric help.

If he did as I said, he would get all the help he needed. I was only doing him a favor when I told him that the vice-president's adored mother was a Croatian, and if the President weren't standing in the way. . . .

Soon I discovered that I did not have to be disembodied to look like Satan. If I composed myself before entering a room and thought the right thoughts, why, then when I went in, all the broad-shouldered braggarts who carve notches on their steering wheels would soon be slobbering all over me, while the guys I really like to talk to—the ones who have something interesting to say if only you can draw them out—would be off in corners saying it to the intelligent-looking girls. Being stunningly beautiful is all right on occasion, I guess. Most of the time I'm better off being myself.

Meanwhile, back at the White House our President was beginning to run for reelection.

I don't know what he was trying to accomplish when he decided to speak at all the towns and colleges that had erupted into riots and violence during the previous four years. Was he trying to prove he was brave? Nobody had ever accused him of cowardice. Maybe he just wanted to show that he was indefatigable.

When he spoke at the Hilton Hotel downtown, I went early to be sure of getting a seat. I wanted to size him up one more time and make certain I knew what I was doing before I started worrying

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about all the little details you can't learn from witchcraft manuals, like how you go about buying an untraceable gun.

So anyway, I went down at four, looking better than usual (if I do say so myself) in a new purple-velveteen trenchcoat I had bought for the trip to Thailand. I left my hat and handbag (minus wallet) in a second-row seat and came back after dinner to find Don Manson, of all people, in the seat next to mine.

"Well, hello!" I said in my friendliest voice.

Don took one look at me, gulped slightly and started talking about how sorry he was that his adored wife couldn't be with him. It seemed that she was at home with the kids. All six of them. Now, if Don was married, odd that he never mentioned it during any of the times we had been out together. Something was funny. Then I realized what it was. I had put on my Satan guise without meaning to and Don had not recognized me. I would have to kid him about that later.

In the meantime, I nuzzled up against him. Don, in panic, nuzzled up to the fat man on his other side. On the dais, Senator O'Keefe spent twenty-five minutes elaborating on the virtues of the man we were about to hear, finally concluding: "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States!"

He seemed older than when I had seen him last, but then so was I. A lot older.

"These are the times that try men's souls," he would have said had it not already been said before. As it was, he had to settle for a second-best sentiment. I forget what it was, I was too busy thinking my own thoughts: "These may be perilous times, but didn't you get us into them? Our souls wouldn't be tried if you hadn't blundered. Just how much do you expect us to suffer for your mistakes?"

His speaking technique had improved in the last four years. Now he glanced at his notes only every few sentences and spent the rest of the time looking out at the audience. Often he seemed to be looking at me. That was probably an illusion but I smiled anyway whenever I thought I had caught his eye.

Then, the speech over, the party faithful shouted, stamped their feet and whirled noise-makers. The President consulted for a few minutes with some men and after that he began to walk along between the rows of chairs, shaking hands as he went with all the people reaching out toward him.

"Here goes nothing," I thought, pushing my arm out between the crowd in the front row.

Suddenly he was standing there, pressing my hand in both of his, and I was totally overwhelmed by the presidential presence.

How could a man with such clear, honest, frank blue eyes have ordered the assassination of the President of Nicaragua? Impossible! It was all lies. And if he had led us a bit too close for comfort to the brink of World War III, the Russians had backed down at the last minute all three times, so maybe he hadn't miscalculated after all. Of one thing I was sure. He was a real nice guy and he was doing the best job he could.

A dark shape, like a pterodactyl,

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that had lived within me for the last four years departed then and fled cawing back over the abyss to the far side, the side of the trilobites, dinosaurs and college professors.

On another far side I saw Jesus, meek and mild, trying to talk to my mother, who wouldn't have anything to do with Him because He looked like a hippy. Poor old Mom. How sad to spend one's whole life in the straitjacket of a narrow mind! And where was I, on this mental Grand Canyon rim? I thought you knew. I was on the third side. The side of the real world. The side the President of the United States was on.

There was a quick, hollow noise, audible even over the roar of the crowd. There was also, I then realized, a folded piece of paper in my hand. Straightening it out, I read, "Go to the west elevator bank at ten tonight and take a car to the tenth floor. 'Sam' will meet you there and bring you the rest of the way." No signature. Of course not. After all, the guy was married.

So. Uncle Sam wants me. And I left my diaphragm back at the dorm, I remember thinking. In the distance men were shouting. Someone screamed. All about me people were asking, "What is it? What's happened?" It was pandemonium.

I looked around but all I could see were the belts of people who were standing on chairs for a better look. Then Napoleon was coming toward me, one hand in the front of his raincoat. Of course it wasn't really Napoleon; it was Bela Benjac. Funny I had never noticed the resemblance before. Bela saw me, stopped and stared. It must have been a real shock to him, seeing the mystic vision of his dreams there in flesh, blood and a purple-velveteen trenchcoat.

Slowly Bela's hand emerged from his slicker. The gun he held was still smoking. He looked like he might start shooting everyone in sight. Beginning with me.

I held out my hand and said, "Bela, give me the gun."

Bela looked at the weapon then as though wondering what it was doing in his hand. He peered down the barrel. Was it a real gun? Experimentally, he pulled the trigger. Just then two men grabbed him from behind but I'm certain Bela fired first. Not that he meant to commit suicide. He didn't know what he was doing. Not ever.

Not any more than I had known. How could I have been so silly and childish that I wanted to kill a man over a trivial slight? And now the President was being carried into an ambulance that had driven right into the room. He must be really hurt. Suddenly I had to talk to someone.

My satanic beauty felt as though it were turned off but I checked my compact to make sure. Then I looked around for Don. He was talking to several beefy-looking men. I came up behind him just in time to hear him say, "I'm sure the girl sitting next to me was his accomplice. She went out of her way to delay the President—you know how he is about women—and then when the assassin nearly got away in the crowd, she called him by name and said, 'Give me your gun.' She was going to hide it for him, you see. Gorgeous redhead, you can't miss her."

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One of the beefy men was looking over Don's shoulder at me. I could just hear him thinking, pretty, yes. But gorgeous? "What was she wearing?" the man asked.

"A brown coat, suede or a suede-like material. Yes, I'm pretty sure it was suede. Look for a gorgeous redhead in a brown suede coat. . . ."

The beefy man was no longer looking at me. I eased my way back through the crowd as fast as I could without making myself conspicuous and took off my purple-velveteen trenchcoat, saying, "Hot in here, isn't it?" to the people around me. No one replied.

As I listened to everyone talk about this terrible, tragic act and imagine all sorts of conspiracies behind it, with student rioters and Communists at the bottom, I realized that I would never be able to tell anyone what I knew. Not even my coven, not even Uncle Fred.

If I asked what power, dark or otherwise, had welded a witch and a madman into a conspiracy to destroy a president who was leading his country into anarchy and war, Uncle Fred would say something silly, like "Anti-entropy."

And Don would turn me in.

Two hours later Senator O'Keefe claimed the microphone. He was so choked up he could hardly speak but he managed to say, "Ladies and gentlemen. The President is dead."

"Nell! What are you doing here?" said Don in my ear.

Absent-mindedly stroking the purple-velveteen trenchcoat folded over my arm with the lining turned out, I answered, "I only wish I knew." ★

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MAN AND THE WEATHER MACHINE

WILL YOUR GRANDCHILDREN live in a new Ice Age?

Not many years ago that would have been a silly question. There was considerable debate about what causes Ice Ages—those periods when the glaciers flow out of the north to cover a great part of the temperature zones, solid sheets of ice creeping over Canada and most of northern Europe, with fingers reaching down as far as St. Louis, Missouri; sea level down by tens to hundreds of feet, torrential rains in the southern US and Mexico, rushing rivers where now there is desert—but everyone agreed that however these periodic disasters were triggered, they did not come on *fast*. Our remote descendents might have to worry about the return of the ice, but surely we did not.

The worst case would do no more than bring back the "Little Ice Age" of the 15th and 16th Centuries, which obliterated the Norse settlements on Greenland and made Iceland a place of poverty. More probable might be a return to the frigid conditions of the 18th Century, when cannon were transported on the ice in New York harbor, and thick ice formed on most of the streams in Northern Europe and the United States. Those we knew could happen, and relatively quickly; but not the great sheets of ice covering inhabitable lands; not the emergence of the land between Australia and New Zealand; not Britain under hundreds of feet of ice and snow. Those took place gradually.

Well, now we know better. The last Ice Age, which peaked about 18,000 years ago, came on with uncommon swiftness. Within a hundred years—possibly in considerably less time than that—the snowblitz struck, and the world was changed.

The Ice Ages could start next

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summer, for all we know. Worse—we could be causing them.

* * *

A traditional concept in science fiction is planetary engineering: the terraforming of worlds, tailoring them to make them more hospitable to human colonization. It seems a pretty far-out idea, and that's all to the good: the real world is fast catching up with science fiction, so that much of what used to be *science* fiction turns out lately to be only *engineering* fiction.

Alas, the real world has caught up again. Terraforming is no longer something for far-out stories. It's a matter of practical concern.

I don't mean that in the sense of terraforming other planets—although, as a previous column ("The Big Rain", GALAXY, September 1975) pointed out, we could, just possibly, begin the terraforming of Venus within our lifetimes. What I'm talking about is the terraforming of Terra. We're doing that now, like it or not—and unlike the superscience heroes of our fiction, we don't have the remotest idea of what effect we're having.

We are doing things to Mother Earth. On that we can all agree. *What* we're doing is unknown. It might be disastrous. It might be beneficial. We may have saved ourselves from a coming Ice Age—and we may be well down the road toward triggering a new one. And no one knows.

Example: in the January 1978 *Scientific American* there's an excellent paper on carbon dioxide. As Dr. George Woodwell, (Director of Ecological Systems Studies at Woods Hole) points out, "human activities are clearly increasing the carbon dioxide content of the Earth's atmosphere." We are burning coal and oil, which have stored carbon for millions of years, and releasing the resulting CO_2. We are also cutting back forests, which are Nature's primary way of taking carbon from the atmosphere and storing it up, eliminating it from the meteorological cycle.

Woodwell asks whether enough carbon can be taken from the atmosphere to be stored in forests and oceans; enough, that is, to avert a major change in climate.

The problem is, no one knows. There are very reputable climatologists who are convinced that fossil-fuel burning can't possibly have a real effect on climate. The argument runs thus: if we go on using fossil fuels at present rates of growth, then by the year 2020 or so the effect of all the extra CO_2 won't be very large, no more than a degree centigrade or so at most, The slight rise in temperature will bring about increased evaporation from the oceans, thus increasing cloud cover; the clouds will reflect back sunlight that would have been absorbed, causing a cooling trend; this will reduce the Earth's temperature. There is, therefore, a negative feedback effect here, damping out the results of the increased CO_2.

Of course if things went on a very long time the cloud cover might not be able to compensate—but by the year 2020 or so we will have run out of much of our fossil fuel, so the process will inevitably

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stop itself before any major damage has taken place.

However, Woodwell's article gives us something else to worry about: deforestation. It turns out that the major part of the CO_2 cycle is carried on through forest belts (not the oceans as we were not long ago told); and the forests, particularly the tropical rainforests, are being cut back and destroyed at an ever-increasing rate.

Furthermore, Woodwell says, forest management techniques do *not* compensate. In the first place, the rain forests are difficult if not impossible to replace; the land underneath is quickly leached out by the driving rain, and the result is a near-sterile hardpack. Secondly, although modern agriculture and forest management do in fact increase the yields of land over what would have grown in "natural" conditions, this is not the same as increased carbon storage; agricultural and managed-forest products are cycled very quickly. The paper produced from Canadian trees is oxidized within months to years, not stored as an ever-deeper pile of humus.

Thus we certainly have an increase of CO_2 in the atmosphere, and the mechanisms for getting rid of it are being progressively eliminated. Should we do something about that?

At this point the discussion gets tricky. There is a school of thought which says, with horror, "of *course* we must do something, and what we must do is stop it; and they way we must stop is to halt industrial growth. The Earth is fragile, and we dare not change it one whit. Turn back, O man, forsake thy foolish ways, while yet there is time."

Despite its emotional appeal, this may not be the most intelligent approach to the problem. Perhaps we should instead ask a few questions; surely it does no harm to take a few minutes off for thought.

The first question is obvious: how much? It is the natural question of the scientist and engineer, although for some reason I don't understand, most people who call themselves "ecologists" seldom think in quantitative terms, and are generally bored by mathematics. (As an aside, when I studied ecology many years ago the professor sent everyone off to take courses in differential equations, on the theory that ecology deals with how one rate of change affects another, and the language with which one studies such changes is calculus; this seems to be a decidedly unpopular view among the ecologists who correspond with me.)

The amount of CO_2 in the atmosphere has risen steadily from the time we first began to measure it. At present there are about 333 parts per million (ppm), up from 315 in 1958. This is a rise of just about one ppm per year, or, in percentages, about three tenths of a percent a year, which may not seem like much. However, this rate means a doubling time of 230 years, and few doubt that doubling the CO_2 in the atmosphere will have a major effect on climate.

Of course it probably won't go that far; we don't have enough fossil fuels; or do we? There is; as I reported in the last column, an

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enormous reserve of frozen methane, and another of methane in geopressurized zones; the quantities approach the known coal reserves of the world, and neither frozen methane nor geopressure zones have been systematically prospected; there may be a very great deal. Methane is not carbon-rich, and produces when burned two atoms of water for each atom of CO_2, but even so there is quite enough to pump out a *lot* of CO_2—and this in addition to the traditional fossil fuels such as coal and oil.

(Another aside: if the frozen methane and geopressure zone gasses are developed quickly, the result will be that coal and oil become far too valuable merely to set a match to; thus even with rising energy use fueled exclusively on fossil fuels the net result would be a decrease in the CO_2 production as the carbon-rich oil and coal are preserved for other uses. However, let's ignore that effect, since we don't know when we'll have practical methane from our "exotic" sources.)

Assume, then, that the trend continues; CO_2 levels rise. What will happen?

The first thought is "hothouse". Although conventional greenhouses including the one in my backyard don't work this way, the "greenhouse effect" is simple enough. Heat comes in from the Sun. The radiant energy goes through the atmosphere and warms the ground. The ground in turn heats the air. However, much of the heat in the ground is re-radiated back into space, and an equilibrium temperature is established.

CO_2, though, is opaque to some of that re-radiated heat. Thus, instead of going back to space, the heat stays with us. The air is warmed, and a new and higher equilibrium temperature is established. If the temperature rises sufficiently to affect living systems—trees, plants, ocean plankton—then there is less CO_2 removed by photosynthesis. Whenever more CO_2 is released—volcanoes, forest fires, blast furnaces, electric generators, automobiles, whatever—it tends to stay. Thus the CO_2 level rises, absorbing more heat, bringing about a new and higher equilibrium temperature. Eventually there is a runaway spiral that ends when the Earth looks like Venus: a dead cloud-wrapped ball with surface temperatures at or above the boiling point of water.

That's hardly a pleasant prospect, and surely something to bo avoided.

However: you can make just as good a case for saying that increased levels of CO_2 will trigger a new Ice Age.

It works this way: CO_2 brings about higher temperatures, but this causes more water to evaporate. Thus there is more rainfall. So far no difference from before. However: much of that rainfall will come down in the Arctic as snow. With greater snowfall there's higher reflectivity on the ground. All that white snow reflects back more sunlight. The Arctic regions get colder. More water vapor comes across, more falls as snow, and the snow continues to spread, chilling larger areas. The ice caps grow, glaciers form, and soon you have a runaway spiral that ends with much of the

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Northern Hemisphere covered with ice.

At this point the intelligent layman is entitled to a hefty objection. We may all be willing to do what is needed to avert disaster—but what disaster? There's a very great difference between Pasteurized plant à la Venus, and the coming of the Fimbulwinter and the return of the ice! Aren't we entitled to know *what* doom we face?

We may be entitled, but no one knows. There is no universally accepted theory of what causes Ice Ages.

To make it worse, there isn't even a universal theory of what effects man's activities have on the climate. We may be warming the Earth. We may be cooling it. We may be keeping it constant. And while we're at it, we don't even know what Nature has in mind for us—after all, the Ice Ages came before man was in the picture, and there are perfectly reputable theorists who believe that we're due for another, and quickly. If they're right, perhaps we had better burn *more* fossil fuels—and also get busy on planetary engineering on a vast scale. We don't need Fimbulwinter.

(Fimbulwinter is a Norse concept of doom: the winter that never ends. Mythologists used to believe it was a legend generated by observations of the cycle of days. People of the far north are very aware that in winter the days get shorter and shorter, and those *very* far north have noonday midnight, as well as midnight Sun. Now, though, a few mythographers wonder if the old Norse legends of war between gods and frost giants do not come from memories of the days when the ice was truly present.)

Well—although we don't know what causes Ice Ages, we do have theories.

One of the first comes from that amazing man Benjamin Franklin, who observed that volcanic dust affected sunsets, and theorized that increases in dust levels could affect the reflectivity of Earth; this would lower temperatures, and might conceivably bring about Ice Ages through a positive feedback system. (He didn't use the modern term "positive feedback", of course, but he did describe the progressive-spiral effect of increased snowfall making the ground brighter and thus reflecting even more sunlight, etc.)

Franklin's theory seemed to be confirmed in 1816. In 1815 a volcano named Tamboura blew off with about as much force as Krakatoa would fifty years later. There were brilliant sunsets through the year, and 1816 goes down in history as "the year without a summer"; growing seasons were drastically shortened, there was heavy grey cloud over Europe all spring, and much increase in rainfall. Incidentally, Tamboura may be thought of as the "father" of Frankenstein. As Nigel Calder says in *The Weather Machine* (excellent book), "it was the atrociously wet summer in Switzerland in 1816 that provoked Lord Byron to suggest that Mary Shelley should write a story. Her gloomy thoughts matched the weather."

The volcano theory has little support nowaday. Ice Ages are a bit too regular to ascribe to something as random as that. Present view is

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that volcanic dust can have a temporary effect, but is not a major cause of glaciation.

Indeed, the modern view runs just the opposite: although a few theorists postulate that Ice Ages come from some kind of cooling event, most believe that what triggers the glaciers is an *increase* in temperature. Something has to transport all those billions of tons of water to the polar regions; that takes energy and lots of it, so how can *subtracting* energy from the weather system accomplish it?

Of course, one of man's effects is similar to volcanic activity: all that fossil fuel burned adds billions of tons of smoke particles to the atmosphere, and few doubt that the effect of *that* is to increase reflectivity (planetary reflectivity is called *albedo* by astronomers) of Earth, and thus to cool things down.

Since the other effect of burning fossil fuels is to add CO_2 and thus warm things up, it can be—and by some with a right to an opinion is—argued that the net effect of man's activity has been about *nil*; the particles cancel out the CO_2.

But don't we *know*? Surely we can tell whether man's activities are raising or lowering the Earth's temperature!

Nope. From 1880, when systematic observations began, to present, the variations in "average Earth temperature" have swung from down about 0.2°C to up about 0.2°C. During the last century, when the "Little Ice Age" ended, things stayed reasonably constant; from 1900 to 1950 there was a sharp rise, from −0.2 to + 0.2°C; since 1950 there has been a fairly sharp downward trend to the present condition.

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If one calculates the maximum effect of human activity—warming through CO_2 release, cooling from smoke particles in the air—neither is great enough to account for what has been observed. The Earth got hotter during this century than CO_2 (ignoring smoke particles entirely) could have made it; at the turn of the century it was colder than smoke particles (ignoring CO_2 entirely) could have brought about.

Man's activities have an effect, but it clearly isn't enough to produce what Nature is doing to us; in fact, man's activities are lost in the *noise*.

And that's assuming that the measurements are accurate. Consider the difficulty: what do we mean by an average temperature? Seasonal variations swing by 30° C

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and more; and we are looking for trends measured in the tenths of a degree. Clearly we can have a very large effect simply by changing the way we calculate the "average."

Yet—small changes can be important.

We study temperatures of the past through a number of techniques: pollen residues found in ocean cores; tree rings; historical records; anything that will give a clue. From these emerges a picture of the climate of the past.

About 5,000 years ago there was a cool period, which was followed by a 2,200 year warming trend. That lasted until 1300 BC (a significant date, as we'll see in a moment) when temperatures fell again. They stayed low until 200 BC, and began to rise, until in 1000 AD there began a "warm snap" that carried the Norse to Iceland and Greenland. This lasted until 1400 AD, peaking in 1200. Then began the "Little Ice Age" mentioned before, which froze out the Greenland colonies, created the stories of ice skating on the canals of Holland, and brought about generally severe winters. In 1900 began the warming trend that took us to 1950.

Some of those dates are significant. The so-called First Dark Age, the period in which writing was lost and European civilization fell from a high culture to a low level indeed, began in 1200 BC or so; Rhys Carpenter ascribes the fall of the Bronze Age to climate, and he has considerable evidence.

We know of the effects of the "Little Ice Age": lowered harvests, famines, generally bad conditions although its effects on cultural history aren't obvious.

The point is that during that entire 5,000 year span, a time in which whole areas became inhabitable or uninhabitable, in which deserts formed in what had been the breadbasket of the Roman Empire—in all that time, the total range of temperature differences was no more than 2° C.

And we have in the last hundred years noted variations of ten percent of that.

Little things can be important.

Now to return to our speculation: what causes the variations in temperature?

Sunspots? There's certainly plenty of evidence that sunspots are significant. Indeed, there's even a theory that the sunspot cycle can trigger earthquakes and volcanoes: the solar wind has a direct effect on the atmosphere, and this is large enough to cause a glitch in the Earth's rotation rate; and that could certainly trigger off faults. (There is serious speculation that when the planets all line up they'll cause sunspot activity which will trigger the San Andreas, and California will slide off into the sea. I don't believe in it, but I am buying earthquake insurance. Can't be too careful.)

And after all, we understand sunspots. They come in regular waves, nice cycles—

Or do they? It appears they do not. A search of historical records indicates long periods of solar quiescence, corresponding with long periods of drought and other climatic effects. After all, sunspots can be observed with a pinhole, and have been known since ancient

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times; and although we have trained ourselves to think of them as a regular cyclic phenomenon, that turns out not always to have been true.

Sigh. Will nothing hold still? Don't we know anything?

Well, we do know a few things. Oddly enough, we do have some theories on what man can do to Earth's climate.

For example, Soviet studies of polar ice are revealing: if all the Arctic ice melted, the effect would be to raise the northern temperatures by more than 40° C, which is interesting, because that is to raise them above the level for the ice to form. The Earth, it seems, can live very well without her northern icecap.

Of couse there would also be a dramatic rise in sea level, and that wouldn't be very good for the inhabitants of New York and Los Angeles and other coastal cities.

On the other end, we can calculate very well what would happen were the Earth covered entirely with ice and snow, and with the clouds all gone. The result would be very much lower temperatures (average about 100° C less than present) and the ice would never melt. The Earth, it seems, could get along very well (although we would not) as a great snowball.

However: both those extremes are not only unlikely, but unstable. Very small variations in the solar output would upset either—and the Sun is now known to be a variable star.

That brings us to the point of this column.

* * *

I was recently asked to prepare a paper on mass hydraulic projects now on the drawing board. These include the NAWAPA (North American Water and Power Alliance) proposal which would bring an annual 160 million acre-feet of water (and that is a *lot* of water) from Alaska and the Yukon down into the southern parts of Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

Certainly the water is needed: civilization runs on water. There's plenty of it in this world, but it is not conveniently located. As I write this, California is still under drought conditions while Oregon has floods. Since it takes about 2,000 liters of water per citizen per day to run a modern industrial civilization; 4,500 metric tons of water to produce a single ton of rice; 10,000 tons of water for each ton of cotton fibre harvested; it would be no bad thing if we could increase the water supply.

Ambitious as the NAWAPA project might seem, it's small potatoes compared to Soviet plans. Already the Volga-Don Canal has affected the level of the Caspian Sea, but not enough: that largest fresh-water lake in the world is drying up. So, plan the Soviets, it could be filled again, by diverting north-flowing streams such as the Pechora from the Arctic regions down into the south-flowing river system.

There's even a Soviet plan to dam up the Yenesei and create a vast new inland sea in Siberia; this would have the effect of moderating Siberian winters. It might also affect the Arctic Sea enough to melt the icecap—one reason Soviet climatologists are interested in the

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effects of that rather drastic move.

I was requested to examine the schemes for possible environmental effects. The engineering feasibilities are not in question; we can accomplish NAWAPA, the Soviets are already at work on the Pechora scheme, and the Yenesei plan is not beyond their capabilities.

But because something can be done does not mean it *should* be done, and despite canards from "environmentalists" few engineers believe otherwise.

But comes now the hitch: we just do not know what the effects of such vast projects would be. We can make guesses, we can do calculations, we can speculate; we can perform studies; but in the last analysis our theory isn't good enough. Not yet.

So what should we do? (Not that my opinion is all that important, except to me; but the question intrigues me.)

There are two possible answers. Understand: the economic benefits of NAWAPA to us, Canada, and Mexico are not much in doubt; nor are the benefits of the Soviet Pechora projects to refill the Caspian and flush out the Sea of Azov.

Understand also: there are great positive "environmental" benefits to be reaped. The Caspian put back to its "natural" state; the Sea of Azov cleaned up; the Great Lakes flushed out, Lake Erie returned to what it was in the days of the American Revolution; these are all fall-out benefits that would certainly result. In addition, the dustbowl areas of the US and Soviet Union would receive enough water to bring back soil stability. Streams in both the western and eastern US would run cleaner.

In other words, there's a lot going for the projects.

But we don't know what they will do. They might cause Ice Ages, or alternatively, heat things up (although that's unlikely).

It occurred to me that these water projects are not greatly different from energy policies. Burning fossil fuels has an effect on the climate, but we don't know what it is. If we develop fusion, that will have an effect. If we put up solar power satellites, they'll have another effect. It's a modern truism, a trite phrase that the ecologists use, that "everything affects everything else" but its triteness doesn't make it less true.

So: what shall we do? Take the approach that because we don't know what effects we'll have, we should no nothing; try to minimize man's impact on the planet, even at the cost of eschewing the undoubted benefits from our hydraulic projects (or from developing new energy sources); or go ahead?

At first blush—and it is probably due to the temper of the times that even I am affected this way—the choice seems clear. Best not meddle. The forces unleashed are just too big for us. The possible disasters outweigh any possible benefits.

But that's at first look. There's another way to see the question.

It requires asking another question: what has Nature done?

And the answer to that is "Plenty!" Over the past 5,000 years we've had pretty wild swings of climate—and those are trivial compared to others we know of.

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Nature has taken this planet from near-universal tropic to the vast glaciers of the Ice Ages. That needn't have concerned us back when we thought none of those extremes came on quickly; but now we know better.

If we do nothing at all we have *not* insured against a new snowblitz. Next winter could be the Fimbulwinter for all we know. Right now this planet is pretty well designed for us—but it need not stay that way, and in fact our historical inquiries (conducted through pollens found in ocean cores, examination of tree rings, radiocarbon dating, etc.) convince us that it's not likely to. Over the long haul things have *got* to change for the worse, and that haul may not be so very long.

Which leads to the other conclusion about planetary engineering: why not? Nature did not design this Earth for us, and she is perfectly capable of changing things so that we can't live here.

We, on the other hand, have ways of modifying climate. We really do have the capability to re-engineer this planet. It's a frightening capability—but it's also very unlikely that any manmade accident will be large compared to what Nature is capable of all by herself.

There's another difference between us and Nature. What we do is at least partly under control. Sure: the High Aswan dam has messed up the ecology of the eastern Mediterranean (and US engineers in fact told the Egyptians it would, which is why we wouldn't build it for them, and why they went to the Russians for help); but the High Aswan is not eternal, and in fact has had a pretty small effect compared to some natural events of that region. It wasn't all that long ago that the Mediterranean was a dry desert. . .

The High Aswan could, if need be, be removed.

The NAWAPA canals and spillways and dams could, if need be, be taken out. The Pechora could, if necessary, be allowed to flow undisturbed northwards. The Caspian could, if need be, be allowed to empty itself again. And so forth.

Agreed: once such vast investments have been made, the decision to undo them (probably undo them in part; not all of the effects would be detrimental) and thus forgo their benefits would not be easy to make. Politically and economically they would be the toughest decisions in history; but they would be *possible* decisions.

Now tell me how to undo the effects of a long period of quiet Sun? Or of vastly increased sunspots? Or of any of a number of other mysterious changes Nature can make, arbitrarily and capriciously, in our environment—changes which we know (not merely wonder about as we wonder about the effects of NAWAPA) will have terrible consequences?

Do we trust man or Nature? A few years ago that was an easy question to answer. Nature loves us. This is our planet, designed for our use.

We can't believe that any more.

Hadn't we better learn something about planetary engineering? We may need to terraform Terra; and we may need to do it sooner than we think. ★

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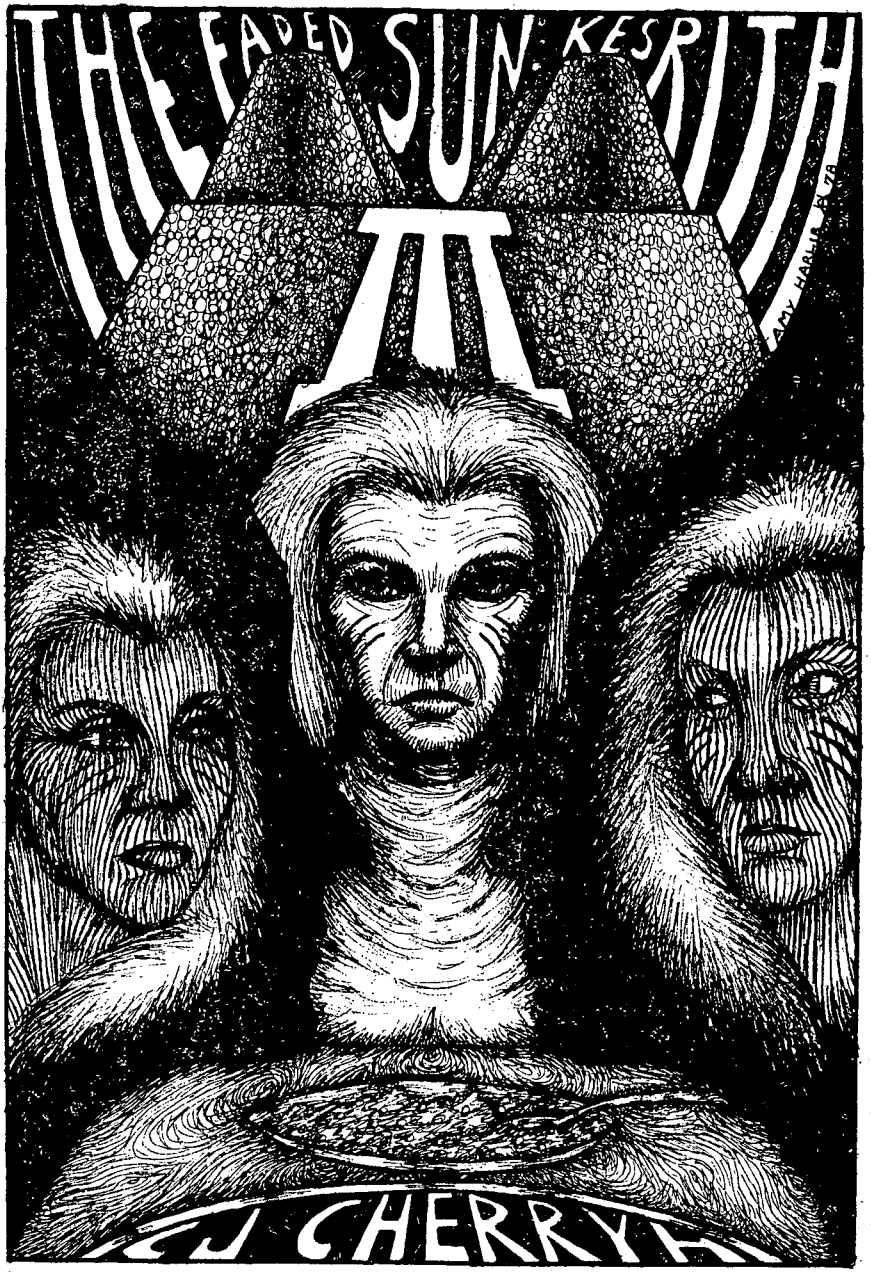

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The *she ' pan* had her plans for the *mri.* But what *were* they?

The mri, a species that survives by hiring out its warrior-caste as mercenaries, has served the regul merchants against humankind–in a war now lost. Thirteen mri presently survive on the mri homeworld, Kesrith; a few hundred more are on ships scattered throughout known space. Those on Kesrith are the old and the infirm, save for Niun and his sister Melein.

Niun , last son born to his dying species, has trained for all his young life to fight humans; but he is held onworld at the side of the aged she'pan (queen/mother) Intel, a battle-scarred and tired ruler addicted to drugs and capricious in her exercise of power.

She *dismissed Niun's cousin Medai to the war, in honor, aboard the regul high-command ship, rejecting Niun's plea to go.* She *took Melein out of her chosen caste, the Kel (warriors), and put her among the scholarly sen-caste.* She *permits nothing to be done while the new regul governor, bai Hulagh, evacuates regul from Kesrith and prepares to hand Kesrith over to human occupation as part of the negotiated settlement of the war.*

Niun is horrified and angry at what he sees happening, regul leaving Kesrith and mri remaining onworld–but there is no way for a warrior to argue with the she'pan, even thougn she be mad and dooming the entire species to needless extinction.

In regul-maintained security, there are others now on Kesrith: Two human observers, Stavros and Duncan, have come in advance of the human occupation forces– Stavros as governor-to-be and chief negotiator, expert in alien affairs; and Duncan as his assistant, in reality a specialist in alien-terrain warfare. But the regul have managed to whisk them from Hulagh's ship to Kesrithi headquarters under such efficient security that they have never really seen *Kesrith itself . . . and Stavros chooses patience under these conditions, an attitude that the young officer Duncan does not find reasonable: Humans will be coming in very soon; ship after regul ship is going out, ostensibly in a regul evacuation of personnel.*

And Hulagh has meanwhile delivered to the mri of Kesrith the dead body of his own attendant mercenary–suicide, say the regul, who are constitutionally incapable either of forgetting a fact or of lying–a death occasioned by the mercenary's despair over the end of the war.

The young mercenary in question was Medai, Niun's cousin; and as Niun sits the lonely deathwatch in the darkened Shrine of his people, there arrives a great dus, *one of the Kesrithi beasts that have always accompanied the mri to war: Each beast chooses a single mri warrior for life. This one is scarred, half-*

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starved, and in miuk, *the madness that comes on a dus under extreme stress.*

Niun suspects that the beast is Medai's, escaped from the regul ship . . . and its evidently prolonged abuse suggests something sinister about Medai's supposed suicide. No mri could abuse a dus, particularly his own; the relationship is too intimate. Yet regul cannot lie.

Perplexed, Niun attempts to win over the suffering beast; it rejects him—a rejection he concludes is judgment on himself, an unfledged warrior, far less a man than he whom this beast has served before. It sits dying at their door, and Niun goes into the desert to bury his cousin and rival.

But he learns then from his elders that Medai was considered and rejected for Intel's personal service. Niun suddenly perceives that there are many things he has not understood . . . and now he sees. He has been reserved by the she'pan for a special reason; Intel's actions seem now frighteningly purposeful from the beginning. It is the death of his species he foresees, and himself the she'pan's last warrior.

Meanwhile the violent nature of Kesrith strikes its own blow: A storm comes down on the regul capital, and in the resulting chaos Stavros suffers a paralyzing stroke—by no means a distressing condition to regul who, in adulthood, normally lose mobility and become confined to prosthetic sleds. Stavros can function by adaptation to a such regul device, but he is more helpless than a regul under such circumstances.

Duncan becomes Stavros' eyes and ears in the regul headquarters, and Duncan has always disagreed with Stavros' acquiescence in their confinement. Now, with Stavros ill, he finds himself having to deal with a species that reveres elders but thinks nothing of killing an inconvenient youngling—which is his status in regul estimation.

Nor is Hulagh himself untouched by catastrophe. The storm has crippled the port and damaged his ship. It is impossible for him to continue the systematic plunder of Kesrith, for Hulagh was doing just that, enriching himself and engineering a coup that would have disgraced the human envoys and saved regul honor, robbing the humans of the wealth they had gained in the treaty.

Now it is a question of even being able to evacuate regul personnel in time, for the human forces will come within a very few days.

Then Hulagh learns that a mri warship is incoming, and in panic he pays an unprecedented call on the mri she'pan, trying to trick the Kesrithi mri into boarding his ship. Intel refuses and he departs in frustration, knowing that he cannot control the mri without she'pan Intel in his hands.

A new report reaches him: The incoming mri ship contains not the usual handful, but hundreds of mri, perhaps the remainder of the species. Kesrith is their chosen homeworld, and they are coming in to join Intel.

With this the specter of all-out war is before Hulagh—a mri-human confrontation that will undo the peace and destroy them all; regul

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cannot fight; and they can no longer restrain the events that are proceeding about them. The mri will be unleashed in a war of their own choosing, with their former employers caught in the middle.

XIII

THE RAIN CAME, a gentle enemy, against the walls of the edun. The winds rushed down, but the mountain barrier and the high rocks broke their force and sent them instead skirling down slopes toward the regul town and port. No strong wind had ever touched the edun, not in two thousand years.

It was comfortable on such a night to take common-meal, all castes together in the she'pan's tower. All evening long there had been a curious sensitivity in the air, a sense of violent pleasure, of satisfaction as strong as the storm winds. The dusei, mood-sensitive, had grown so restive that they had been turned out of the edun altogether, to roam where they pleased this night. They disappeared into the dark, all but the *miuk'ko* at the gate, that found no discomfort at all in the world's distempers.

And the spirits of the kel'ein were high. Old eyes glittered. There was no mention of the ship that was coming, but it was at the center of everything.

Niun, likewise among the kel'ein, felt the surge of hope at the arrival of *Ahanal*. Of a sudden, dizzying views opened before his feet. Others. Brothers, Rivals. Challenge, and hope of living. And himself, even unfledged, even without experience in war, hitherto no person of consequence; but this was homeworld, and he of homeworld's Kel; and he was, above all, the she'pan's kel'en. It was a heady, unaccustomed feeling, that of being no longer the least but one among the first.

"We have been in contact with a mri ship," was all the word the she'pan had given them that morning before the arrival of the regul bai; and that, outside its name, was all that they knew. The Lady Mother had gathered them together in the dawning and spoken to them quietly and soberly, and it was an effort for her, for she lay insensible so much of the time. But for a moment, a brief moment, there had been an Intel Niun had never before seen: It had awed him, that soft-voiced, clear-headed stranger who spoke knowledgeably about lanes and routings around Kesrith that were little-monitored by regul. In riddles she spoke at times, but not then. "Soon," she had said. "Very soon. Keep your eyes on the regul, kel'ein."

And quickly then, more quickly than they had anticipated, the regul bai had come; making them offers.

The regul were concerned. They were presented with something that had never happened before, and they were alarmed and confused.

"Intel," said Eddan, her eldest Husband, when dinner was done and Niun had returned from carrying the utensils to the scullery—that and the storerooms being the only parts of the Kath-tower that remained open. "Intel, may the Kel

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ask permission to ask a question?''

Niun settled among the kel'ein quickly, anxious and at once grateful that Eddan had waited until his return; and he looked at Intel's face, seeking some hope that she would not deny them.

She frowned. ''Is the Kel going to ask about the ship?''

''Yes,'' said Eddan, ''or anything else worth the knowing.''

The she'pan unfolded her hands, permission given.

''When it comes,'' asked Eddan, ''do we go or do we stay?''

''Kel'ein, I will tell you this: that I have seen that Kesrith's use is near its end. Go, yes; and I will tell you something more: that I owe the regul bai one kel'en, but no more. And I do much doubt that he will come back to collect that promise of me.''

Old Liran, veilless as they all were veilless in the intimacy of the common-meal, grinned and made a move of his scarred hand.

''Well, she'pan, Little Mother, if he does come back, send me. I would like to see whether Nurag is all it is claimed to be; and I would be of scant use in the building of another edun. This one, all cracks as it is, is home; and if I am not to stay with this one, why, I might as well take service again.''

''Would a service among the People not do as well, Liran?''

''Yes, Little Mother, well enough,'' Liran answered, and his old eyes flickered with interest. He darted a glance at Eddan, an appeal: *Ask questions, eldest.* The whole Kel sat utterly still. But the she'pan had turned their question aside. Eddan did not ask again.

''Sathell,'' said Intel.

''She'pan?''

''Cite for the Kel the terms of the treaty that binds us to the service of regul.''

Sathell bowed his head and lifted it again. ''The words of the treaty between doch Holn and mri are the treaty that keeps us in service to the regul. The pertinent area: *So long as regul and mri alone occupy the homeworld, whereon the edun of the People rests . . . or until regul depart the homeworld, whereon the edun of the People rests . . .* This long we are bound to accept service with regul when called upon. And I hold, she'pan, that in spirit, if not in letter, regul have already failed in the terms of that treaty.''

''Surely,'' said the she'pan, ''we are not far from that point. We contracted with doch Holn. Doch Holn might have known how to deal with us, but this bai Hulagh is apparently of Nurag itself, and I do not think he knows the People. He erred seriously when he did not take urgent care to see to our evacuation long before now.''

''Holn knew better,'' said Sathell.

''But Holn neglected to pass on to her successor all that she might have told him. The old bai Solgah kept her silence. Neither do regul tend to consult written records. The regulkind do not make good fighters, but they are, in their own way, very clever at revenge.''

And Intel smiled, a tired smile that held a certain satisfaction.

''May the Kel,'' asked Eddan, ''ask permission to ask a question?''

''Ask.''

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"Do you think the Holn deliberately excluded us from the assets she turned over to this bai Hulagh?"

"I believe the Holn will consider this a stroke of revenge, a salve to their pride, yes. Bai Hulagh has lost the mri. In such manner regul fight against regul. What is that to us? But I am sure of this," she said in a hard tone, "that Medai was the last of my children to leave on a regul ship, the last of my children to die for regul causes. And hereafter, hereafter, kel'ein, do not plan that mri should fight mri again. No. We do not fight."

There was palpable dismay in the whole Kel.

"May the Kel ask—?" Eddan began, unshakably formal.

"No," she said. "The Kel may not ask. But I will tell you what is good for you to know. The People are dangerously declined in numbers. Time was when such fightings served the People; but no longer, no longer, kel'ein. I will tell you a thing you did not ask. The ship *Ahanal* bears what remains of all the People, and we are the rest. There are no more."

There was cold in the room, and no one moved. Niun locked his arms tightly about his knees, trying to absorb personally what the Mother had said, hoping that it was allegory, as she often spoke in riddles. But there was no way to believe it a figure of speech.

"At Elag," said Intel in a thin, hard voice, "while regul evacuated their own kind, they threw the kel'ein that served them against humans again and again and again, and summoned the kel'ein of Mlassul and Seleth edunei, and lost them as well. But this mattered little to regul, to this new bai, Hulagh, to this new master sent out from Nurag."

There was a sudden sound, an impact of fist on flesh; and Eddan, who did not swear, swore. "She'pan," he said then. "May the Kel ask—"

"There is nothing more to ask, Eddan," said Intel. "That is the thing that happened, the thing that cost ten thousand mri lives, and also ships—ships of which I do not know the tally. Many, many of the ships were regul, without regul personnel aboard because the regul feared to stay. They killed ten thousand mri. And I curse the she'panei who lent their children to such as that."

A fine sweat beaded Intel's face, and pallor underlay her skin. The sound of her breathing was audible, a hoarseness, above the sound of the rain outside. Never had the gentle Mother cursed anyone, and now the enormity of cursing other she'panei chilled the heart; neither was there repentance on her face.

Niun drew his breaths carefully, sucking in air as if he drew it off the noon-heated sands. His muscles began to tremble and he clenched his hands the harder lest someone notice it, if anyone could notice anything but his own heartbeat in that terrible silence.

"Little Mother," Sathell pleaded. "Enough. Enough."

"The Kel," she said, "finds it necessary to ask questions. It is due an answer." And she paused for a moment, drawing great breaths as though she intended next something

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very necessary, something urgent. "Kel'ein," she said, "chant me the *Shon'jir.*"

There was a stirring among the kel'ein, mounting panic and dismay. *She is dying* was Niun's first thought, and *O Gods, what an ill omen of things!* And he could not say the words she asked of them.

"Are you children," she asked of her Husbands, "to believe any longer in luck, either good or bad? Chant me the passing-ritual."

They looked at Eddan, who inclined his head in a gesture of surrender and began, softly. Niun joined them, uncertain in this insanity in which they were bidden join.

From Dark beginning
To Dark at ending,
Between them a Sun,
But after comes Dark,
And in that Dark
One ending.

From Dark to Dark
Is one voyage.
From Dark to Dark
Is our voyage.
And after the Dark,
O brothers, O sisters,
Come we home.

Intel listened with her eyes closed and afterward there was a long silence; then her lids lifted, and she looked on all of them as from a far place.

"I give you," she said, "a knowledge which kel'ein knew long ago, but which passed from the Kel-lore. Remember it again. I make it lawful. Kesrith is only a between, and Arain only one of many suns, and we are near an ending. In the People's history, kel'ein, are many such Darks; and the regul have afforded us only the latest of our many homes. For this reason we call it *Shon'jir*, and in the low language, the passing-ritual. For this reason we say it at the beginning of each life of the People and at each life's ending; and at the beginning of each era and at its ending. Until another she'pan shall bid your children's children, Niun, forget what I have told you. Only the Kel may remember."

"Mother," he said, raising a hand to her in entreaty, "Mother, is it the moving of homeworld you mean?"

Too long she had been mother to him, and he realized after he had spoken his question that she was due more courtesy; he sat with his heart pounding, waiting to hear her coldly rebuff him by asking Eddan if the Kel had a question to pose.

But she neither frowned nor refused his question. "Niun, I give you more truth to ponder. The regul call themselves old; but the People are older. The two thousand years of which you know are only an interlude. We are nomads. I say that the Kel shall not fight; but the Kel has other purposes. Last of my sons, the Kel of the Darks is a different Kel than the Kel of the Between. Last of my daughters, assuming the she'panate of the Darks is a duty I do not envy you."

Upon an instant the whole Kel was torn, each one of them, into a fearful, astonished attention.

The succession was passed, not in fact, but in intent; and Niun looked at his onetime brothers and saw their dismay; and he looked at

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Melein and saw her pale and shaken. She veiled herself and turned away from them; and of a sudden he felt himself utterly alone, even there, amid the Kel. He bowed his head and stayed so while the voice of Eddan, subdued, begged leave to question, which request the she'pan refused.

"The Sen asks," said Sathell's voice then, and by that a question was posed that could not be refused. "She'pan, we cannot make these plans without consulting together."

"Is that a question, sen?" the she'pan asked dryly, and in the shock of that collision of wills, there was silence. Niun looked at them, from one to the other, appalled that those who ruled his life did not agree.

"It is a question," said Sathell.

The she'pan bit at her lip and nodded. "Yet," she said, "we have made these plans without consulting. I did not consult when I made sure that *Ahanal* was reserved from the madness at Elag. I did not consult when I maintained our base on Kesrith against the urging of some to leave. I have made these plans without consulting, and I have left the People no other choice."

"To the death of our Kath and most of our Kel, when we might have had Lushain for homeworld instead, where there is water and gentle climate, where we might have had a rich world, she'pan."

"That old quarrel," she said in a still voice. "But I had my way, Sathell, because the she'pan, not the sen'anth, leads the People. Remember it."

"The Sen asks," said Sathell in a trembling voice, "*why*. *Why* must it have been Kesrith?"

"Is your knowledge adequate? Do you know the last Mysteries, sen'anth?"

"No," Sathell acknowledged, an answer wrung from him.

"Kesrith was the best choice."

"I do not believe it."

"I said at the time," said Intel softly, "that I decided as I saw fit. That is still true. I do not require your belief."

"This I know," said Sathell.

"Kesrith is hard. It kills the weak. It has performed its function."

"This forge of the People, as you called it, has performed its function too well. We are too few. And Elag has left us with nothing."

"Elag has left us with a remnant like the remnant of Kesrith," said Intel. "With what has been through fire."

"A handful."

"We have given the People," she said, "a place to stand, and stand we shall until humans stand on Kesrith. And then . . . the Dark. After that—a decision that will belong to others than you and me, Sathell."

There was silence. Sathell rose suddenly and caught at the wall for support, his weakness betraying him. "To others then," he said, "let it pass now."

And he walked out. His footsteps descended the tower.

Eddan bowed himself, went to Intel and took her hand. "Little Mother," he said gently, "the Kel approves you."

"The Kel knows little," she said, "even now."

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"The Kel knows the she'pan," he said, a faint voice. And then he looked about at the others, seeking Melein last of all. "Sen Melein, make the cup for her."

"I will not drink it tonight, Eddan," Intel said.

But Eddan's look said otherwise, and Melein nodded, silent conspiracy against Intel's will, and rose and poured water and *komal* into a cup, preparing the draught that would give Intel ease.

"Go," said Eddan to the Kel.

"Niun will stay," said Intel, and Niun, who had risen with the others, stopped.

Downstairs the main door opened and closed, a hollow crash.

"Gods," Pasev breathed and cast a look at Intel. "He is leaving the edun."

"Let him go," said Intel.

"She'pan," said Melein's voice, a clear note of anguish. "He cannot stay the night out there in the weather."

"I will go after him," said Debas.

"No," said the she'pan. "Let him go."

And after a moment it was clear that there was no changing her mind.

There was nothing to be done. Melein settled at Intel's side, still veiled, her eyes averted.

"The Kel is dismissed," said Intel, "except Niun. Sleep well, kel'ein."

But Eddan did not wish to be dismissed. He stayed last of all, though Intel gestured him away.

"Go," she said. "There is nothing more I can tell you tonight, Eddan. In the morning set one of the kel'ein to watch the port from the high rocks. Sleep now. This storm will keep the regul inactive, but tomorrow is another matter."

"No," said Eddan. "I am going after my brother."

"Without my blessing."

"All the same," said Eddan, and he turned to go.

"Eddan," she said.

He looked back at her. "We are getting too few," he said, "to make many journeys to Sil'athen. Sathell would not willingly have left Nisren. Neither would I. Now we will not leave Kesrith. We will walk toward Sil'athen, he and I. Together we will be content."

"I give my blessing," she said after a moment.

"Thank you," he said, "she'pan."

"she'pan."

And that was all. Eddan left; and Niun stared after him into the dark of the hall, trembling in every muscle.

They were as dead, Eddan and Sathell. They had chosen: Sathell, after the fashion of his kind, to take the long walk; and Eddan, untypical for his caste, to go with him. And Niun had seen Eddan's face, and there was no heaviness in it. He heard the kel'anth's steps going down the spiral, a quick and easy stride, and the door closed behind him too; and thus it was certain that the edun was now less by two lives, and they had been indeed great lives.

"Sit by me," Intel bade them.

"She'pan," said Melein in a thin, strained voice, "I have made your cup. Please drink it."

She offered it, and the tray shook in her hands. Intel took the cup

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from her and drank and returned it, leaning back as Niun settled, kneeling, on her left hand, and Melein on her right.

So they had spent many of the nights since Medai's death, for Intel's sleep was not easy and she would not sleep without another in the room.

This night Niun envied her the draught of *komal*; and he would not look at her as she waited for the draught to have effect but instead bowed his head and stared at his hands in his lap, shaken and shattered to his innermost heart.

Eddan. Eddan and Sathell, that had been a part of all his life. He wept, naked-faced, and the tears splashed onto his hands, and he was ashamed to lift a hand to wipe them away, for the Kel did not weep.

"Sathell is very ill," said Intel softly, "and he knows well what he does. Do not think that we parted hatefully. Melein knows. Eddan knows. Sathell was a good man. Our old, old quarrel. . .he never agreed with me, and yet for forty-three years he has given me his good offices. I do not grudge that he simply stated his opinion at the last. We were friends. And do not feel badly for Eddan. If he had done otherwise, I would have been surprised."

"You are hard," said Niun.

"Yes," she said. And her slight touch descended on his shoulder, brushed aside the *zaidhe*. He slipped it off, wadded its cloth in his clenched fists, his head still bowed for his eyes were wet. "Last son of mine," she said then, "do you love me?"

The question, so nakedly posed, struck him like a hammer-blow; and in this moment he could not say smoothly, yes, Mother. He could not summon it.

"Mother," he said painfully—of her many titles, the best and dearest to the Kel.

"Do you love me, Niun?" Her soft fingers brushed past his mane, touched the sensitivity of his ear, teasing the downy tufts at its crest. an intimacy for kinswomen and lovers. *Here is a secret,* the touch said, *a hidden thing. Be attentive.*

He was not strong enough for secrets now, nor for any added burden. He looked up at her, trying to answer.

The calm face looked down on him with curious longing. "I know," she said. "You are here. You pay me duty. That is still a good and pious act, child of mine. And I know that I have robbed you and denied you and compelled everything that you have done and will ever do."

"I know that your reasons have been good ones."

"No," she said. "You are kel'en. You do not know; you believe. But you are proper to say so. And you are right. Tomorrow, tomorrow you will see it, when you see *Ahanal*. Melein. . . ."

"She'pan."

"Do you mourn Sathell?"

"Yes, she'pan."

"Do you dispute me?"

"No, she'pan."

"There will be a she'pan on *Ahanal*," said Intel. "That she'pan is not fit as I have made you fit."

"I am twenty-two years old," protested Melein. "She'pan, you could take command of *Ahanal*, but

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if they challenge, if they should challenge—"

"Niun would defend me, defend me well. And he will defend you in your hour."

"Do you pass his duty to me?" Melein asked.

"In time," she said, "I will do this. In your time."

"I do not know all that I need to know, she'pan."

"You will kill," said Intel, "any who try to take the Pana from you. I am the oldest of all she'panei, and I have prepared my successor in my own way."

"In conscience—" Melein protested.

"In conscience," said the she'pan, "obey me and do not question."

And the drug began to come over her and her eyes to dim, and she sank into her cushions and was still.

It was said, in a tale told in the Kel, that at the fall of Nisren humans had actually breached the edun, ignoring mri attempts to challenge to *a'ani*: this the first and most bitter error the mri had made with humans. A human force had swept through the halls while the Kath in terror had tried to escape; Intel had put herself between humans and the Kath, fired the hall with her own hand. Whether because of Intel or the fire, those humans had not come against her. She had held long enough for some of the Kath to escape, until the embattled Kel could reach that hall and get her to safety, aboard the regul ship.

That aspect of the gentle Intel had always seemed incredible to Niun—until this night.

XIV

Duncan heard the hum of machinery. It awakened him, advising him at once that Stavros had need of something. He pulled himself off the couch and gathered his fatigue-dulled senses. He had not undressed. He had not put Stavros to bed. Storm-alarms had made most of the night chaotic. There was a time that constant storm advisories were coming over communications.

He heard the storm shields in Stavros' quarters slide open. He went in, noting that the alarms were past and the screens showed clear. The dawn came up ruddy and murky, flooding a peculiar light through the glass.

Stavros was sitting in the center of that glow, a curious figure in his mobile sled. He whipped it about, so as to face Duncan, with a jaunty expertise. The communication screen lighted.

Look outside.

Duncan stepped up to the rain-spattered window and looked outward, scanning the desolate expanse of sand and rock, the sea and the towers of the water-recovery system. There was something wrong, a gap in the silhouette, a vacancy where yesterday structures had stood.

There was a particularly dark area of cloud over the seacoast, flattened by the winds, torn and streamered out to sea.

Stavros' screen activated again.

Advisory just given: water-usage confined to drinking and food preparation only. "Minor repairs at plant." They ask we remain patient.

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"But we've got people coming down here," Duncan protested.

Suspect further damage at port. Regul much disturbed. Bai "not available."

The rain slacked off considerably, leaving only a few spatters on the windows. The murky light grew for a moment red, like that from fire; it was but Arain, through thick cloud.

And on the long ridge that lay beyond the town there was a shadow that moved. Duncan's eyes jerked toward it, strained upon that one spot. There was nothing to be seen.

"I saw something out there," he said.

Yes, the screen advised him when he turned. *Many. Many. Maybe flood drove beasts from holes.*

In a moment another shadow appeared atop the ridge. He watched as yet another, and another, and another, appeared. His eyes swept the whole circuit of the hills. Against the sullen light there was a gathering row of black shapes that moved and milled aimlessly.

Mri, he had feared.

But not mri. Beasts. He thought of the great unpleasant beasts that had been found with dead mri, ursine creatures that could be as dangerous as their size warned.

"They're mri-beasts," he said to Stavros. "They've got the whole area ringed."

Regul call them dusei. They are native to Kesrith. Read your briefings.

"They go with mri. How many mri are supposed to be here? I thought it was only a handful."

So the bai assures us–a token presence, to be removed.

Duncan looked at the horizon. The clouds stretched unbroken. And the dusei were a solid line across the whole ridge, encompassing the visible circuit of the sea to the town.

Duncan turned from the sight of it, shivered, looked again. He considered the rain, and the land. Working his sweating hands, he turned again and looked at Stavros. "Sir, I'd like to go out there."

"No," Stavros murmured.

"Listen to me." Duncan found it awkward to talk at such an angle, dropped to one knee so that he could meet the old man eye to eye, set a hand on the cold metal of the sled. "We've got only regul word for it that the regul don't lie; we've got mri out there; we've got a colony mission coming in here in a matter of days. You took me along. I assume you had some feeling then you might need me. I can get out there and take a look and get back without anyone the wiser. You can cover for me that long. Who cares about a youngling more or less? They won't see me. Let me go out there and see what kind of situation we're facing, with those ships coming in. We don't know how bad it is with the water; we don't know what shape the port is in. Are you that confident we're always told all the truth?"

Weather hazardous. And incident with regul likely.

"That's something I can avoid. It's my job. It's what I know how to do."

Argument persuasive. Can you guarantee no incident?

"On my life."

Estimate correct. If incident oc-

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curs, then regul law prevails out there. You understand? Survey facilities, plant, port, return. Can cover you till dark.

"Yes, sir."

He was relieved in some part; he did not look forward to it. He knew the hazard better perhaps than Stavros did. But for once he and the Honorable Stavros were of one mind. Hunting out the hazards was more comfortable than ignoring them.

He rose, looked outside, found the dusei's dark line vanished in that brief interval. Blinking, he tried to see through the haze of rain but could make out little in the distance.

"Sir," he murmured to Stavros by way of farewell; Stavros inclined his head, dismissing him. The screen remained dark.

He went quickly to his own quarters and changed uniforms, slipping into khaki weatherproofs and sealed boots, still common enough in appearance that he did not think regul would notice the difference. He put into the several pockets a tight roll of cord, a knife, a packet of concentrates, a penlight, whatever would fit without obvious outlines. He flipped the hood into the collar and zipped the closures.

Then he strolled out into the hall on a pattern he had followed several times a day since he had studied the layout of the building, went down the hall to the left and out toward the observation-deck window. No one was in the hall. He opened the door and went out into the rain-chilled air, circled the low-walled observation deck, looked over his shoulder to see that the hall beyond the doors was still clear. It was

He quite simply sat down on the edge of the wall, held with his hands as he dropped, and let go. The regul stories were short by human standards. He landed on cement at the bottom, but it was not a hard drop at all, only a flex of the knees; and the cement showed no tracks. By the time he reached the edge of the concrete and disappeared into the gentle rolls of the landscape, he was confident that he was unobserved.

He walked toward the waterplant, turning up the hood of his uniform as he went for he knew the warnings about the mineral-laden rains and cared to expose as little of his skin as possible. Now off the pavements of the city, he left tracks as plain as wet sand allowed, but he did not reckon to be tracked at all. He felt rather self-pleased in this, which he had thought about for days, idle exercise of his professional mind during the long inactivity in the Nom; the fact was that no regul could possibly have done what he had just done, and therefore the regul had not taken precautions against it. Such a drop would have been impossible to their heavy, short-legged bodies, and likewise there was no regul that could come tracking him crosslands.

That would take a mri.

And that was the only thought that made him a little less self-pleased than he might have been under the circumstances. He had wanted arms at the outset of the voyage, but the diplomats had denied them to him: unnecessary and provocative, they had reasoned.

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Now he was unarmed but for the kit-knife in his pocket, and a mri warrior could carve him into small portions before he could come close enough to make use of it for defense.

The fact was clear that should regul set a mri on his trail, he was dead; but then, he reasoned, should regul dare do that, the treaty was obviously worth nothing, and that fact had as well be known early.

There was also the possibility that the mri were out in force and that they were not under regul control; and that, most of all, needed to be known.

For that reason he exercised more caution than he would have had he feared only regul. He watched the ridges and the shadows of gullies and took care to look behind him, remembering the dark shapes that had moved upon the hills, the dusei that were out there somewhere; he crossed dus-tracks—long-clawed, ominous reminders that there were hunters aprowl other than regul or mri.

Briefings said that the beasts did not approach regul dwellings.

Briefings also said that crossing the flats off the roads was not recommended.

The jetting steam of geysers, the crunch of thin crusts underfoot, warned him that there was reason for this. He had to draw a weaving course around hot zones, approaching the lowest part of the flats, that near the seashore and the waterplant.

There was a road of sorts, badly washed, along the seacoast. Parts of it were underwater. A regul landsled was down in a trench, where it

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had slid off the edge.

Duncan sat down, winded in the thin, cold air, his head and gut aching, and watched from a distance as a regul crew tried to extricate it.

He could see the waterplant clearly from this vantage point. There was chaos there too, beyond its protective fences. The towers extended far out into the white-capped water, and several of those towers were in ruins. From what he could see, there was no possibility they could be even cleared for repair in the few days remaining before human ships would arrive, certainly not with the prevailing weather. What was more, he could not see any evidence of heavy machinery available to make repairs.

Realistically estimating, it was not going to be done at all. A large human occupation-force was going to land, having to depend totally on ships' recycling: irritating, but possible—that is, if there were a place to land.

He looked to the right along the shoreline, toward the city and beyond, where he could see the low shape of the Nom; there were no buildings high enough to obstruct his view of the port. He recognized *Hazan*, saw its alien shape surrounded by gantries, a web of metal.

There was no way to set a ship down on the volcanic crusts that overlay most of the lowlands. If the port were in the same condition as the waterplant , there was going to be merry chaos when the human forces tried to land.

And the regul had not been forward to inform them of the extent of damages to the facilities at the plant. They had not lied, but neither had they volunteered all the truth.

He drew a breath of tainted air and looked behind him suddenly, chilled to realize that he had been thinking about something other than his personal safety for a few seconds. The horizon was clear. There were only the clouds. A man did not always find himself that fortunate in his lapses.

He let go that breath slowly and gathered himself up, conscious of the pounding of his head and the throbbing of his heart in the thin air. He saw a way to move around some low rocks and a sandy shelf and so cross between the city and the sea, working toward the port. Regul were reputed to have dim eyesight, to be dull, as it happened, in all sensory capacities. He hoped that this was so.

Stavros, sitting back in the embrace of his regul machine, had said that he could cover his absence. He reckoned that Stavros might be good at that, skilled at argument and misleadings as he was.

Out here he knew his own job, knew with a surety that the instinct that had drawn Stavros to choose a SurTac for Kesrith had been a true one. Stavros had not ordered him but had only relied on him, quietly waiting for him to move of his own accord, sensing, perhaps, that a man trained in the taking of alien terrain would know his own moment.

He could not afford a mistake now. He was afraid, with a different sort of fear than he had ever known on a mission. He had operated alone before, had destroyed, had escaped—his own life or death on his head. He was not accus-

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tomed to working with the life or death of others weighing on his shoulders, with the burden of decision falling upon him to say that an area was safe, or not safe, for the landing of a mission involving hundreds of lives, and policies reaching far beyond Kesrith.

He did not like it; he far from liked it. He would have gladly cast the responsibility on any higher authority available; but Stavros, bound to his machine, had to believe either the regul or his own aide, and Duncan desperately wanted to be right.

XV

The edun woke quietly; the People moved in silence about the daily routine. Niun went back to the Kel, which was now empty-seeming; and the Kel sat in mourning. Eddan did not return.

And Pasev's eyes bore that bruised look that told of little sleep; but she sat unveiled, in command of her emotions. Niun brought her a special portion at breakfast, and it tore his heart that she would not eat.

After breakfast the brothers Liran and Debas spoke together and then rose up and put on the belts with all their honors, and *mez'ein* and *zaidh'ein*, and gave their farewells.

"Will you all leave?" asked Niun, out of turn and out of place, and terrified. And he looked then at Pasev, who had most reason to go, and did not.

"You might be needed," said Pasev to the brothers.

"We will walk and enjoy the morning," said Liran. "Perhaps we will find Eddan and Sathell."

"Then tell Eddan," she said softly, "that I will be coming after him when I have finished my duties, which he left to me. Goodbye, brothers."

"Goodbye," they said together, and all the remaining Kel echoed "Goodbye," and they two walked down from the tower and out across the road.

Niun stood in the doorway to watch them go, a deep melancholy upon him; and a knot settled in his throat, considering their absence hereafter. They continued their way to the horizon, two shapes of black; and the sky was shadowed and threatening, and they had not so much as the comfort of their dusei in their journey, for none of the beasts had come home.

The *miuk'ko* by the door had disappeared also, dead, perhaps, in the storm: Dusei went away to die, alone, like kel'ein that found no further hope in their lives.

Loyal to Intel, Niun thought, and loyal to Kesrith, and foreseeing the end of both, Lira and Debas could not help now and so they departed, their honors on them, not seeking ritual-burial from a young kel'en already too over-burdened with duties.

They had chanted the rites last night. It was ill-omened; they all knew it. It was as if they had chanted them over Kesrith itself, and he suddenly foresaw that few of the old ones, if any at all, would board the ship.

They did not want Intel's dream. She had shown them the truth of the rites and they had not wanted it; they had seen only the old, familiar ways.

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She had promised them change, and they would have none of it.

He was otherwise shaped, formed by Intel's hands and Intel's wishes, and loyalty to Melein would hold him bound to Intel's dream. He looked on the place in the rocks where the brothers had disappeared and could have wept aloud at what he then realized of them and of himself—for Pasev would follow rather than take ship into uncertainties for which she had no longing; and after her would go the others.

He would never be one with the like of them; he was black-robe, plain-robe, honorless and untested, shaped for different ways. *The Kel of the Darks*, she had said, *is a different Kel.*

It was he that already stood in the Dark; and they had walked away from the shadow, departed now into what they knew.

He turned, to seek the edun, the Shrine's comfort for his mood; and his heart chilled at what he saw along the lower ridges, row upon row of shadows moving there.

Dusei.

They ringed the regul town in every place that offered solid ground. Ha-dusei, wild ones, and dangerous.

The dusei of the edun had not returned.

And there were far too many of the ha-dusei, far too many.

The sky roiled overhead, stained with red and sullen gray: storm-friends, the dusei, weather-knowing. In the days before the edun stood, they had watered here below: the Dus-plain, the lowland flats were called. They came as if they sensed change in the winds; they came as if awaiting the regul departure, which would return the Dus-plain to the dusei.

Waiting.

It was told of regul stubbornness that the first mri had warned the regul earnestly that they should build their city elsewhere, as the edun itself had been carefully positioned off the plain in respect of the bond between mri and dusei; but regul had wanted rock for their ships to land on and they had sounded the area thereabouts and found only on the Dus-plain rock suitable for a port near the sea. Therefore regul had built there, and there had grown a city, and the ha-dusei had gone away.

But dusei returned now, with the unseasonal rains and the destroying winds. They sat and waited.

And the dusei had abandoned even the mri.

Niun shrugged, half a shiver, and walked inside and stopped, not wishing to bear that news to the Kel, or to the she'pan. The Kel was in mourning, the she'pan still lost in dreams; and Melein, her Chosen, had veiled herself and sealed herself alone in the Sen-tower.

He cast a yearning thought skyward, through the spiral corridors that massed over him, that *Ahanal* hasten its coming, for he did not think that he could bear the endless hours until the evening.

And each thing that he thought of doing this day was pointless, for it was a house to which they would never return; and outside, the weather threatened and the lightnings flashed in the clouds and the thunder rumbled.

So he sat down in the doorway,

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watching all the flats below, the geysers' plumes, predictible as the hours, their clouds torn and thrown by gale-force winds. It was a cold day, as few days on Kesrith were chill. He shivered and watched the heavy drops pock the puddles that reflected a sky like fire-on-pewter.

A heavy body trod the wet sand: a whuff of breath, and a great dus lumbered round the corner, head hanging. Others followed. He scrambled up in terror, not sure of their mood; but wet and muddy-pawed, they came on and nosed their way past him into the edun, rumbling that hunger-sound that betokened a dus with a considerable impatience. He counted them in: one, two, three, four, five, six. And last came the *miuk'ko*, the seventh, bedraggled and angular, to cast itself down in the puddle at the base of the slanted walls, drinking with great laps of its gray tongue at the water between its massive paws.

Three did not come. Niun waited, a relief and a disquiet growing in him at the same time—relief because a bereaved dus was dangerous and pitiable, disquiet because he did not know how they had known. Perhaps the three that were missing had encountered their kel'ein.

Or perhaps, with that curious sense of dusei, they had known and sought them. Perhaps they were far along the trail to Sil'athen. He earnestly hoped so; it would be best for both men and dusei.

He went to the storerooms in the cellar of Kath. The dusei must have care.

And first of all of them, he waited on the *miuk'ko*, that had left its post of mourning for the first time and then returned. He hoped it would be in a different mind.

But it would not eat. Perhaps, he thought, it had fed during its hours of wandering. But he did not believe it. He left the food on the dry edge of the step and went to carry portions to the others.

Save for the insistence and irreverence of the dusei, save for Melein, who grieved in her tower, the edun had become a place of dreams, and a sense of finality hung over everything: the dus by the gate, the old men and the old women. He crept about his tasks with the utmost quiet, as if he, alone living, walked in the caves at Sil'athen.

And in the evening the ship came.

* * *

The she'pan was asleep when they heard it descending; and they that were left of the Kel hurried out to the road to see it, and on tired faces there were smiles, and in Niun's heart there was misgiving. Dahacha took his arm on impulse and pressed it, and he looked at the sun-wrinkled eyes and felt an unspoken blessing pass between them.

"Dahacha," he whispered. "Will you come, at least?"

"We that have not walked will come," said the old man. "We will not send you alone, Niun Zain-Abrin. We have made our reckoning. If we would not, we would have gone with Eddan, like Liran and Debas."

"Yes," said Palazi at his other side. "We will reason with the kel'anth."

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And it struck him, like a blow upon a wound, that this now referred to Pasev.

The commotion of the ship's landing was visible in lights, in the flares of regul headlights that crawled serpent-wise toward that far side of the field, half-glow in the red twilight—regul eyes were not adapted to the night.

"Come," said Pasev, and they followed her into the halls and upward to the she'pan's tower.

Melein was there beside Intel, and she touched the she'pan's hand and tried to awaken her, but it was Pasev who laid a firm grip on the she'pan's arm and shook her from her dreams.

"She'pan," said Pasev, "she'pan, the ship has come."

"And the regul?" In the she'pan's golden eyes the dream finished and that keenness returned, focused and struggling for control. "How do the regul bear it?"

"We do not know that yet," said Pasev. "They are all astir, that is all we saw."

Intel nodded. "No contact by radio. Regul will be monitoring; *Ahanal* will observe that caution also." She struggled with the cushions, a small moue of pain upon her face; and Melein adjusted them for her. She sighed and breathed easily for a moment.

"Shall we," asked Dahacha, "Little Mother, carry you to the ship? We can bear you."

"No," she said with a sad smile. "A she'pan is guardian of the Pana. There is no ship-going for me until that care of mine is finally discharged."

"At least," said Dahacha then, "let us take you down to the road, so that you can see toward the port."

"No," said Intel, firmly. And then she touched Dahacha's hand upon the arm of her chair and smiled. "Do not fear: I am in possession of my faculties and in possession of this edun and this world, and so I will remain until I am sure that it is my time; and yours will not be until mine is. Do you hear me?"

"Aye," said Pasev.

Intel met the eyes of the kel'anth and nodded, satisfied; but then her glance strayed about the room, perhaps counted faces, and her eyes clouded.

"Liran and Debas left some time ago," said Pasev. "We gave them farewell."

"My blessing," she murmured dutifully.

Pasev bowed her head in acknowledgment. "Until the she'pan dismisses me," she said, "I serve you, and there are still enough of us to do what needs doing."

"We will not be long about it," said Intel. "Niun, child," she said, and held out her hand.

He knelt at her knee and took her hand in his, bowed his bared head to her touch, felt her fingers slip from his and give that gesture of blessing.

"Go crosslands," she said. "Go to the ship and talk with the visitors face to face, and hear what they have to say. Answer wisely. You may have to take decisions on yourself, young kel'en. And do not go carelessly. We have almost ceased to serve regul."

Something passed his bowed

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head; he felt weight settle on his neck, and caught at it, and his fingers closed on cold metal. When he turned it and looked at the amulet on the chain, he saw the open-hand-emblem of Kesrithun edun. Intel's silken fingers touched his chin and lifted his face to meet her eyes.

"Only one *j'tal*," she said softly, "but a master-one. Do you recognize it, my last son?"

"It is an honor," he said, "of a she'pan's kel'en."

"Bear yourself well," she said. "And make speed. Time is important now."

And she pushed at him with her fingers and he rose, almost fearing the eyes of the others—the kel'ein who might have been honored with such a *j'tal*—for he was the youngest and the least. But there was no envy in them, only gladness, as if this were something in which they were all agreed.

He took off his house-robe, and there in the she'pan's chamber they all took hand in preparing him for the journey, hastening to bring him the *siga* that he should wear in walking the dusty lands, and *zaidhe* and *mez*; and they gave him their own weapons, both yin'ein and za-hen'ein, finer than his own; and with a smile, a laugh that deprecated superstition older than memory among the People, Palazi unclipped a luck-amulet from his own belts and gave it to him, a maiden warrior, giving him of his luck.

"Years and honors," said Palazi.

He hugged the old man, and the others, and returned to the she'pan for a last hasty bow at her feet, his heart pounding with excitement. But as he received her kiss upon his brow, she did not let him go at once, but stared into his face in such a way that it chilled all the blood within him.

"You are beautiful," the she'pan said to him, her golden eyes brimming with tears. "I have a great fear. Be careful, youngest son."

The People no longer believed in presciences with any great fervor, no more than he really trusted Palazi's luck-wish; but he shivered all the same. There was mri-reason and regul-reason; and to believe only what could be demonstrated by experience, that was the regul way, not the mri.

One who had lived as many years as Intel might have reasons he did not understand. His whole life had been spent in the presence of the forbidden and the incomprehensible; and she'pan Intel had been involved in most: *she'pan*—keeper of the Mysteries.

"I shall be careful," he said, and she let him go then. He avoided the eyes of Melein when he rose, for if the she'pan and her Chosen shared anything concerning him, he did not want to carry it with him on this mission.

"Do not trust any regul," said the kel'anth. "See all that you look upon."

"Yes," he agreed earnestly, and took Pasev's hands and pressed them gently by way of farewell to the brothers and sister of his caste.

He turned away quickly and left, long strides carrying him hurriedly down the spiraling stairs, past the written names of the history and heroes of the People and the truth of all the things that Intel had hinted at, things that he could not

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read. He felt their meaning this day, the remembrance of his ancestors.

All, all that Intel had desired, had been passed down to him; and she had been able, at the last, to let him go, to cast him like the *as-ei* in *shon'ai*. And she had not lost him. There was too much of love poured into him by these old ones that he could fail the wishes of Eddan, of Intel, of Pasev and Debas and Li-ran. They had made sure that he would succeed before they had launched him about the she'pan's mission.

He passed the main doors and closed them against the night, and saw there the monstrous bulk of the *miuk'ko*, a shadow beside the door. The great head lifted and the eyes stared at him in the dark.

Perhaps, he thought, optimism uncrushed in a hundred repetitions of this coming and going, *perhaps this time. It would be good if it were this time at last, he who needs me, I who need him.*

But it murmured and turned its face and laid its massive head in the mud. Male, female, or neither; no one had ever ascertained the sex of a dus, or reckoned why it came to one mri or why it refused to come to another; whether this one had yet comprehended that Medai would never return, whether it grieved, or whether it starved out of simple stupidity, waiting for Medai to feed it, Niun could not fathom.

With a sad shrug he went his way, scarcely having paused that half-step; but in this passing there was a difference, for things the dus did not understand had changed, were changing, were about to change. And it was doomed, having rejected him.

Likely the humans would destroy the dusei. Regul would have done so gladly, if not for mri protection. The size and the slow-moving power of dusei were very like those of regul, but regul instinctively hated the dusei. Regul could not, as mri could, become immune to the poison of the claws; they could not, as mri could, abandon themselves to the simplicity of the beasts. Therefore regul fled them.

The unease the contact of the dus had left in Niun stayed the while he walked down toward the flats, toward the ghostly plumes of geysers under the wind-torn clouds. He smelled the wind, felt the familiar force of it, like some living thing.

He found himself looking at the familiar places he had seen and known all his life and thinking of each: *This is almost the last time.* There was an excitement in his heart and an uncertainty in his stomach that were far from heroic and cheerful. His senses were alive to the whole world, to the scents of the earth, acrid and wet, to the feel of the damp, hot breath of the geysers, that each had their name and manner.

His world.

Homeworld.

Impermanent as the wind, the Kel, but capable of loving the earth. It struck him that they did not know where they were going, that Intel spoke of the Dark as if it were a place, as if it had dimension and depth and duration like the world itself. It came to him that after leaving Kesrith he might never feel earth under his feet again; a Dark with promise, the she'pan had in-

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sisted, but he could not imagine what it promised.

And hereafter to deal with kel'ein who were not old, long-thinking men—with kel'ein who knew only war and were touchy of their pride and their prerogatives of caste, in a way that the gentle Kel of Kesrith had never been.

To live among the Kel of strangers, where there were kath'ein who would be his for the asking, and the chance to get children, and to see his private immortality. He would be son to one she'pan, truebrother to another, honored next whatever fen'ein, Husbands, she would choose to sire her children on the kel'e'ein and the kath'ein of the edun, if first he survived the combat of succession.

Choices spread before him in dazzling array, in dizzying profusion, foretelling a future full of things neither stale, nor predictible, nor sure.

He walked swiftly, passing where reeking sulphur and steam obscured his way, where water dripped from recently sprayed rocks and the heat underground prepared further eruptions. He knew his timing to a nicety. The thin crusts on the right—boiling water and mud underlay much of that ground. The edge that he trod would bear a mri's weight but not that of a dus or a regul. Regul had learned bitter lessons about Kesrith's flatlands; they did not stray now from the safety of their vehicles and aircraft and carefully chosen roads and landing-sites. It would need a long time for humans to learn the land, if they would ever dare leave the security of the regul city.

Some would surely die learning it. A few mri had done so.

He could cease to care what humans did. They would gather up the People and go, all of them, Dahacha and Palazi and the others; and Intel too—they would persuade her too. Although she was old and very tired of struggles, she could at least begin the journey.

And then they could leave without even wanting to look back.

He stood at last atop the long white ridge that was above the port and saw the shape of the regul ship *Hazan*, and opposite it, the new one of *Ahanal*.

Ahanal—the Swift.

He slid down the moonlit ridge in a white powdering of dust and crossed the long slope to the lower ground.

And a shadow flowed among the rocks, large and menacing. He turned, hand on his pistol, and looked up at the hulking form that had mounted a ridge.

Ha-dus. For a moment he did not breathe, did not move. Three others showed. Silent, the great beasts could be, when they stalked; but they did not stalk him. He had only disturbed their vigil.

He remained still, respectful of their right to be here, and they snuffed the air and regarded him with their small eyes, and finally gave that explosive question-sound that indicated the fighting-mood was not upon them.

Pardon, brothers, he wished them in his mind, which was the best way to deal with a strange and skittish dus, and backed a few paces before he edged on toward his former course: language the dus un-

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derstood, a matter of movements that one made or did not make.

His hand shifted from the pistol to the amulet at his breast. It was not the moment to risk his life with the ha-dusei, far from it; and he walked more slowly, more cautiously, remembering Pasev's admonishment to use his eyes and his wits.

They let him go, and when he looked back, they were no longer there.

He walked from the white dust to the artificial surface that covered the firm rock of the northern rim area; and there was a fence, a laughable affair of wire screen that could stop nothing that was truly determined, not on Kesrith. He burned it, made himself a door in it, with fine disregard for regul obstructions on the free land. Any mri would do the like rather than walk around a fence, and regul met the like with outrage; but it was the mri way, and in this mri would not oblige the masters.

Bloody-handed savage, he had heard one of the regul younglings call him in the town.

But regul built fences and made machines that scarred the earth, and tried to divide up space itself into territories and limits and parcels to be traded like foodstuffs and metals and bolts of cloth. It was ludicrous in his eyes.

He walked amid the great tangle of abandoned equipage and skeletal braces and vehicles. It was as he had foreseen: a vast graveyard of vehicles and machines, a clot of metal so tightly jammed together that he had to detour around the whole of it, a heap of vehicles and sleds and aircraft indiscriminately mixed as if some giant hand had piled them there—these the vehicles that had ferried the inhabitants of all the settlements the regul had ruled.

And there, there a great burned area with a tower in charred and jagged outline against the port lights, an angular tangle of braces and more goods that the regul had cast aside as waste. Storm-shattered, burned: The damage at the port had then been very extensive. He looked about him as he walked, taking inventory of things he had once seen whole and saw now damaged, and he began to see reason for the regul's distressed behaviors.

Hazan stood in a vast assemblage of gantries and hoses and fragile extensions, and about that ship, too, he saw evident damage. She was aglow with lights, acrawl with black figures that labored on her like carrion insects; and a steady line of vehicles moved toward her, bearing goods, no doubt, for loading and for repairs.

He passed this area, careful of being seen, and rounded the shape of *Hazan*. There, a tower before him, stood *Ahanal* once more, looming against the sky with only one light brought to bear upon her hull.

He drew near and saw that she was old, her metal pitted as with acids, her markings seared almost beyond recognition. Long scars marked where shields must have failed.

He voice-hailed them, conscious of the nearness of regul sentries, of a sled that had already started his way.

"*Ahanal!*" he cried. "Open your

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hatch!"

But either they were not prepared to hear or they had reason to be uneasy of the regul; and there was no response from *Ahanal*. He saw the sled veer sharply, coming to a halt near him, and a youngling regul opened the sidescreen to speak to him.

"Mri," said the regul, "you are not permitted."

"Is this the order of the bai?" he asked.

"Go away," the regul insisted. "Kesrithi mri, go away."

There was a sudden crash of metal: The hatch had opened. He ignored the regul to glance upward at the ship, from which a ramp began to extend. He walked toward it, disregarding the regul.

The sled hummed behind him. He moved, narrowly missed. The fender clipped the side of his leg, and the sled circled in front of him, blocking his path.

The window was still open. The youngling regul was breathing hard, his great nostrils opening and shutting in extreme agitation.

"Go back," it hissed.

Niun began to step around the sled but it lurched forward and he rolled on his shoulder across its low nose, landed on the other side and ran, shamed and frightened. Mri were watching from the ramp, doubtless outraged at his discomfiture. His legs were weak under him with terror for what he had done, a thing that no mri had ever done—he had defied the masters directly.

But he was the she'pan's messenger and if he delayed to argue with the youngling, there would be regul authority involved, with orders to obey or disobey, with a crisis for the she'pan that a mere kel'en could not resolve without direct violence.

He ran, hit the echoing solidity of the ramp and raced up it as quickly as he could to meet the mri of the ship, but they were already fading back into the ship and did not stay for him. He heard, and felt, the ramp taking up behind him, shortening its length as he overtook the last of them. Lights came on then, blinding; doors shut, sealing them safely inside.

Ten kel'ein: Husbands, by their age and dignity. There was cold light, and air piercing in its sterility after the air of Kesrith. The final seal of the lock closed between them and the outside, the ramp in place. There was silence.

"Sirs," he remembered to say and stopped looking at them—with their many *j'tai* and their grim, strangers' manner—long enough to touch his brow and pay proper respect. He looked up again and unveiled, a courtesy which they grudgingly returned.

"I am Niun s'Intel Zain-Abrin," he said in the high language, as all mri used in formatlities. "I bear service to Intel, she'pan of Edun Kesrithun."

"I am Sune s'Hara Sune-Lir," said the eldest of them, an old man whose mane grayed at the temples and who looked to be of the age of Pasev or Eddan; but his fellows were younger, more powerful-looking men. "Does the she'pan Intel fare well?"

"The edun is safe."

"Does the she'pan intend to come in person?"

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"As to that, sir, not until I return with the word of your she'pan."

Niun understood somewhat their attitude, that of men who loved and defended their own, men who must yield to she'pan Intel, she who must in turn yield them also. It was natural that they look on Intel's messenger with resentment.

"We will take you to her," said Sune s'Hara with formal grace. "Come." And, with better courtesy: "You are not injured?"

"No, sir," he said, and then remembered with a sudden flush that it was not proper for him to defer to this man, that he was a messenger and, more than that, he betrayed himself for a very young kel'en, and inexperienced in his authority.

"Regul and mri are not at ease in Kesrith," he added, covering his confusion. "There have been words passed."

"We were met with weapons," Sune said. "But there were no casualties."

Niun walked with them, passing through corridors of metal, halls designed for regul. He saw kel'ein and he saw kel'e'ein, veiled and youthful as he, and his pulse quickened—he thought them glorious and beautiful, and tried not to stare, although he knew that their eyes were taking close account of him, a stranger among them. Some unveiled in brotherly welcome when he met them, and a great company of them went through the corridors to the mainroom, to that center of the ship that was now the hall of a she'pan.

She was middle-aged. He went and bowed his head under her hands and then looked up at her, vaguely disturbed to be greeted by a she'pan not in the familiar earthen closeness of a tower but in this metal place, and to be greeting a she'pan who was not kin, whose emblem on her white, blue-edged robes was that of a star, not the hand-emblem of Edun Kesrithun.

She was a stranger, one who must die, who must choose to die, or whose champion he must defeat should she challenge; and he prayed silently to all the Gods that she would be brave and gracious and forego challenge.

Her eyes were hard and she existed in light harsh enough to hurt; and the world that surrounded her was cold and metal. Many, many of the ship-folk surrounded them now, their she'pan, their beloved Mother, and not his: he an intruder, a threat to her life.

They saw a she'pan's messenger, but one innocent of *j'tai* won in battles—a mere youth, unscarred, untried, and vulnerable to challenge.

He felt her eyes go up and down him, reckoning this, reckoning his world and those who had sent him. And beyond her, about her, he saw gold-robed sen'ein; and black-robed kel'ein; and shyly observing from the recesses of the further hall, he saw kath'ein, blue-robed, veilless and gentle and frightened.

And about them, within the other corridors, were row on row of hammocks slung like the nestings of Kesrith's spiders, threads of white and webbings that laced the room and the sides of the corridors. He was overwhelmed by the number of those that crowded close; and yet it struck him suddenly that here was

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his whole species, all reduced to this little ship, and under the present command of this woman.

"Messenger," she said, "I am Esain of Edun Elagun. How fares Intel?"

Her voice was kinder than her face, and shot through him like sun after night. His heart melted toward her, that she could speak kindly toward him and toward Intel.

"She'pan," he said, "Intel is well enough."

He put kindness into his voice, and yet she understood, for a shadow passed through her eyes, and fear; but she was a great lady, and did not flinch.

"What does Intel wish to tell me?" asked Esain.

"She'pan," he said, "she gave me welcome for you, and sent me to listen to you first of all."

She nodded slightly, and with a move of her hand bade council attend her. Kel'anth and sen'anth and kath'anth came and sat by her; and the fen'ein, her Husbands of the Kel; and the body of the Sen; and while these took their places, the others withdrew, and doors were closed.

He remained kneeling before her and carefully removed his *zaidhe* and laid that before him; and on it he laid the *av-kel*, the Kel-sword that was Sirain's lending, sheathed before him, hilt toward her, a token of peace. His hands he folded in his lap. Her kel'ein did the same, hilts toward him, the stranger in their midst, the visitor admitted to council.

"We send greetings to Intel," said Esain quietly. "Of her wisdom long ago was *Ahanal* reserved for the People, and of her wisdom was *Ahanal* freed to come. She placed such a burden on the Kel, refusing regul assistance, that there was no honorable choice. Honor outweighed honor. This was wisely done. All aboard understand and are grateful that it was done in time, for nothing else could have compelled us from the front. Is it true, as we guess, that she intends to leave regul service?"

"Her words: We have almost left regul service. Your fen'ein and the kel'anth saw the result of it when I came toward the ship."

She looked at the kel'anth. He gave agreement with a gesture.

"I have seen a thing I have never seen," the old man said. "A regul attacked this messenger—not with hands, to be sure, but with his machine. These regul are desperate."

"And the edun?" the she'pan asked, her brow crossed with a frown. "How fares the Edun of the People, with the regul in such a mood?"

"Presently secure," he said, and—for he saw the real question burning in her, that she would hesitate to ask a mere kel'en—"she'pan, the Forbidden is in her keeping; and the regul are busy with the damage the weather has done them. Humans are close, and the regul fear delays that could hold them grounded. I think that what happened out there was the act of a youngling without clear orders."

"Yet," said the she'pan, "what if we were to leave the ship in a body?"

"We are mri," said Niun with supreme confidence, "and regul

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would give way before us, and they would dare do nothing."

"Did you so judge," asked the she'pan, "of that youngling that attempted your life?"

Heat mounted in his face. "She'pan," he said, made aware of his youth and his inexperience, "I do not think that was a serious threat."

She considered, and looked at the Sen and the others, and finally sighed and frowned. "I bear too great a charge here to risk it. We will wait until Intel has made her decision. We have force here at her call; I will send it or reserve it as she says. And, messenger, assure her that I will respect her claim on the People."

He was shocked and relieved at once, and he bowed very low to her, hearing the murmur of grief run the length and breadth of the room. He could hardly bear to meet her eyes again, but found them gentle and unaccusing.

"I will tell her," he said; recovering the courtesies trained into him, part of blood and flesh and bone, "that the she'pan of Edun Elagun is a grand and brave lady, and that she has earned great honor of all the People."

"Tell her," she said softly, "that I wish her well with my children."

Many veiled themselves, hearing her, and he found his own eyes stinging.

"I will tell her," he said.

"Will you, messenger, stay the night with us?"

He thought of it, for it was a walk of the rest of the night to return again to the edun, and likely a great deal of sleep lost thereafter, once Intel had begun to give orders; but he thought of the regul that had crossed his path, and the weather, and the uncertainties that hemmed him about.

"She'pan," he said, "my duty is to go back now; it is best now, before the regul have time to take long consultations."

"Yes," she said, "that would be the wisest thing. Go, then."

And she, when he had gathered up the *av-kel* and replaced the *zaidhe* and come to touch her hand and do heartfelt courtesy, gave into his hand a ring of true gold, at which his heart clenched in pain; for it was a gracious, brave thing to do, to give a service-gift as if he had well-pleased her. From her own finger she drew it and pressed it into his hand, and he bowed and kissed her fingers before he stood and took his leave. He laced the ring into one of the thongs of his honors, to braid it in properly later, and bowed her farewell.

"Safe passage, kel'en," she said.

He should wish her long life, and he could not; he thought instead of that parting of kel'ein: "Honors and good attend," he said, and she accepted his courtesy with grace.

The Kel veiled and he did so likewise, grateful for that privacy as they led him back to the doors, to let him out into the dark.

He heard the mournful protest of a confined dus, attuned to the mood of the Kel it served; and with that he entered the lock and the lights were extinguished, to make them less a target.

For a moment the darkness was complete. The the opening ramp and the double doors let the light

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in, the floodlights on the field, and the acrid, wet wind touched them.

They did not speak as he left. There had not been a word passed. It was due to their Lady Mother's courage that he and one of hers would not shed blood in the passing of power; but it was settled.

When there was only one she'pan on Kesrith, there would be time for courtesies, for welcome among them.

He did not look back as he started down the ramp.

XVI

Niun had expected trouble at the bottom of the ramp, but there was none, neither regul guard nor the assistance that such guard might have summoned. He questioned nothing of his good fortune but ducked his head and ran, soft-soled boots muffling his steps across the pad.

He threaded again the maze of machinery, and there, there were the regul he had feared, a flare of headlights beyond the fence. He caught his breath and paused half a step to survey the situation, then slipped to the shadows and changed course, reckoning that there was no need to use the same access twice. He burned through the wire fence, kicked the wire aside and ran for it, his lungs hurting in the thin air. Somewhere a dus keened, mournful over the rumble of machinery that prowled the dark.

He reached the edge of the apron and bolted for the sand, startled and shocked as a beam of light hit the ground across his path. He gasped for air and changed direction, darted around the bending of a dune and ran with all the strength he had remaining.

After a moment he reckoned himself relatively safe, enough to catch his breath again. Regul could not outrace him and the noisy machines could not surprise him. He smothered a cough, natural result of his rash burst of speed, and began uneasily to take account of this new state of affairs, that regul had, with premeditation, sought not to catch him, but to kill him.

He lay against the side of the dune, his hand pressed to his aching side, trying to keep his breathing normal, and heard something stir—dus, he thought, for he knew that the hills were full of them this night, and did regul come out very far into the wild after him, they would meet a welcome they would not like. The dusei of the edun would do no harm to regul; but these were not tame ones and the regul might not reckon that difference until it was too late to matter.

He gathered himself up and started to move forward, hearing at the same time a rapid sound of footsteps, mri-light and mri-quick, following his track through the dunes. He surmised it for one of Esain's kel'ein, on some desperate second thought; and for that reason he froze, hissed at the shadow a warning as it fronted him, respectful of it, another kel'en.

But no kel'en.

Half a breath they faced each other, human and mri; and in that half-breath Niun whipped up his pistol and the human dived desperately to retreat, vain hope in that

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narrow, dune-constricted area.

And in the next instant another thought flashed into Niun's mind: A dead human could provide little answer to questions. He did not fire. He followed; and when he overtook the human, he motioned with his hand, come, come. The human, casting desperate looks behind and at him, was a fair target should Niun fire.

And the human chose regul and whirled and ran.

A creature that had no business on Kesrith.

Niun thumbed the safety on, holstered the pistol and chose a new direction, a direction the regul could not manage, up over the arm of a dune; and he cast himself flat, scanning the scene to know what manner of ambush he had sprung. Indeed the human had run directly into regul hands, in the person of one daring youngling who now had him cornered against a ridge the human could easily climb if he had the wit to think of it; and the human did think of it and scrambled for his life, fighting to gain the top. But the regul laid hold on his ankle and dragged him back again, inexorably.

They noticed nothing else. Niun retreated behind the ridge, raced a distance, went over and down in a plummeting slide, hit the solid mass of the regul and staggered it; and when it rounded on him clumsily, making the mistake of aiming a weapon at a kel'en, it was the youngling's final mistake. Niun did not think about the flash of the *as-ei* that left his hand and buried themselves in the youngling's throat and chest; they were sped before the thought had time to become purpose.

And the human, scrambling to reach the regul's gun—Niun hit him body to body, and had there been a knife in Niun's intentions, the human would have been dead in the same instant.

No mean adversary, the human. Niun found himself countered, barehanded, in his attempt to seize hold of him; but the human was already done, bleeding from the nostrils, his bubbling breath hoarse in Niun's ear. He broke the human's hold; his arm found the human's throat and snapped his head back with a crack of meeting teeth.

Not yet did the human fall, but a quick blow to the belly and a second snap to the head toppled him, writhing, to the sands; and Niun hit him yet another time, ending his struggles.

A strip from his belt secured the human; and he recovered his *as-ei* and sheathed them quickly, hearing the slow grinding of machinery advancing on this place, and the both of them having made tracks even the night-blind regul could read.

The human was showing signs of consciousness; Niun gave him a jerk by the elbow and dragged him until the man tried to respond to the discomfort. Then he gave him slack to drag his legs under him and to try to stand.

"Quiet," Niun hissed at him.

And if the human thought to cry out, he thought better of it with the edge of the *av-tlen* near his face; he struggled up to his knees and, with Niun's help, to his feet, and went silently where he was compelled to go. He coughed and tried to

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smother even that sound. His face was a mask of blood and sand in the dim light that shone from the field, and he walked as if his knees were about to fail him.

Onto the edge of the flats they went, and slow, ominous shadows of dusei stood watching them from the dunes, but gave them no threat. There was no sound of pursuit behind them. Perhaps the regul were still in shock, that a kel'en had raised hand against the masters.

Niun knew the enormity of what he had done; he had had time to realize it clearly. He knew the regul, that they would take time to consult with authority, and beyond that he could not calculate. No mri had ever raised hand to his sworn authority. No regul had ever had to deal with a mri who had done so.

He seized the human's elbow and hurried him, though he stumbled at times, though he misstepped and cried out in shock when a crust broke with him and he hit boiling water. They went well onto the flats, where neither regul nor regul vehicles could go, into the sulphuric steam of geysers that veiled them from sight. By now the human coughed and spat, bleeding in his upper air passages if not in his lungs, Niun reckoned.

In consideration of that he found a place and thrust the human down against the shoulder of a clay bank and let him catch his breath, himself glad enough of a chance to do the same.

For a moment the human lay face down, body heaving with the effort not to cough, correctly assuming that this would not be tolerated. Then the spasms eased and he lay still on his side, exhausted, staring at him.

Unarmed. Niun took that curious fact into account, wondering what possessed the humans; or what had befallen this one, that he had lost his weapons. The human simply gazed at him, eyes running tears through sand: no emotion, no expression other than one of exhaustion and misery. Unprotected he had come into Kesrith's unfriendly environment; unwisely he had run, risking damage to his tissues.

And he had run from regul, with whom his people had made a treaty.

"I am Sten Duncan," the human whispered at last in his own tongue. "I am with the human envoy. Kel'en, we are here under agreement."

Niun considered that volunteered information: Human envoy; human envoy—the words rolled around in his mind with the ominous tone of betrayal.

"I am kel Niun," he said, because this being had offered him a name.

"Are you from the edun?"

Niun did not answer, there seeming no need.

"That is where you're taking me, isn't it?" And when again the human had no answer of him, he seemed disquieted. "I'll go there of my own accord. You don't need to use force."

Niun considered this offer. Humans lied. He knew this. He had not had experience to be able to judge this one.

"I will not set you free," he said.

It was not the custom of humans to veil themselves; but Niun was

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sorry, all the same, that he had so dealt with a human kel'en, taking dignity from him—if he were kel'en. Niun judged that he was: He had handled himself well.

"We will go to the edun," he said to Duncan. He stood up and drew Duncan to his feet; he did not help him overmuch for this was not a brother; but he waited until he was sure he had his balance. The man was hurt. He marked that the human's steps were uneven and uncertain, and that he walked without knowledge of the land, blind to its dangers.

And deaf.

Niun heard the aircraft lift from the port, heard it turn in their direction; and the human had not even looked until Niun jerked him about to see it. He stood stupidly gazing toward the port, malicious or dullwitted, Niun did not pause to know. He seized the human and pulled him toward the boiling waters of Jieca, that curled steam into the night; and by a clay ridge, their lungs choked with sulphur, they took hiding.

Regul engines passed. Lights swept the flats and lit plumes of steam, fruitlessly seeking movement. Heat-sensors were of limited usefulness here on the volcanic flats. The boiling springs and seething mud made regul science of little value in tracking them.

"Kel'en," Duncan said, "which one are they looking for? Me, or you?"

"How have you offended the regul?" Niun asked, reckoning it of no profit to give information, but of some to gain it; and all the while the beams of light swept the flats, lighting one plume and then another. "Were you a prisoner?"

"Assistant to the human envoy, to come—" A burst of fire lit their faces and spattered them with boiling water. They made a single mass against it, and as the firing continued and the water kept splashing, a rumble began in the earth and a jet of steam broke near them, enveloping them, uncomfortably hot but not beyond bearing.

"Tsi'mri," Niun cursed under his breath, forgetting with what he shared shelter; and as the barrage repeated itself, he felt the human begin trembling, long, sickly shudders of a being whose strength was nearly spent.

"—to come ahead of the mission," the human resumed doggedly, still shaking. "To see that everything is as we were promised. And I don't think it—"

A near burst threw water and mud onto them. The human cried out, smothered it.

"How many of you are there?" Niun asked.

"Myself . . . and the envoy. Two. We came on *Hazan* . . . back there."

Niun grasped Duncan's collar and turned his face to the light that glared from the searching beams. He saw nothing to tell him whether this was truth or lie. This was a young man, he saw, now that the face was washed clear by the moisture that enveloped both of them—a kel'en of the humans; Niun shrank from applying that honorable title to aliens, but he knew no other that applied to this one.

"There was a kel'en on *Hazan*," said Niun, "who died there."

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For the first time something seemed to strike though to the human: there was a hesitancy to answer. "I saw him. Once. I didn't know he was dead."

Niun thrust him back, for the moment blind with anger. Tsi'mri, he reminded himself, and enemy, but less so now than the regul. *I saw him. I didn't know he was dead.*

Niun turned his face aside and stared bleakly at the rolling steam and the lights that criss-crossed the flats, searching.

Forgive us, Medai, he thought. *Our perceptions were too dull, our minds too accustomed to serving regul, that we could have understood the message you tried to send us.*

He forced himself to look at the hateful human face, that had not the decency of concealment—at the nakedness of this being that had, unknowingly perhaps, destroyed a kel'en of the People. *Animal,* he thought; *tsi'mri animal.* The regul-mri treaty was broken from the moment this creature had set foot on Kesrith; and that had been many, many days ago. For this long the People had been free, and had not known it.

"There is no more war," Duncan protested, and Niun's arm tensed, and he would have hit the human; but it was not honorable.

"Why do you suppose that the regul are hunting us?" he asked of Duncan, casting back his own question. "Do you not understand, human, that you have made a great mistake in leaving *Hazan*?"

"I am going with you," the human said, the first semblance of dignity he had shown, "to talk to your elders, to make them understand that I had better be returned to my people."

"Ah," said Niun, almost moved to scornful mirth. "But we are mri, not regul. We care nothing for your bargains with the regul, much good they have done you."

The human remained still and considered Niun's words, and there was no yielding at the implied threat. "I see," he said. And a moment later, in a quiet, restrained tone: "I left the envoy down there in town—an old man, alone with regul, with this going on. I have to get back to him."

Niun considered this, understanding. It was loyalty to this sen'anth for which he endured this patiently. He gave respect to the human for that, touched his heart in token of it.

"I will deliver you alive to the edun," he said, and felt compelled to add: "It is not our habit to take prisoners."

"We have learned that," Duncan said.

Therefore they understood each other as much as might be. Niun considered the flats before them, reckoning what might already have been done to familiar ground by the bombardment, what obstacles might have been created on the unstable land, where they might next find safest shelter should the regul sweep back sooner than anticipated.

It was well that he and the human had come to an understanding, that Duncan considered that his best chance and most honorable course was to cooperate for the moment. A man unburdened could make the

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journey by morning, all things in his favor; but not with regul blasting away the route about them; and day would show them up clearly, making it next evening before they could reach the edun if things kept on as they were.

A sick dread gathered in Niun's stomach; for very little even so, he would have killed the human and run for the edun at all speed.

He cursed himself for his softness, that had put him to such a choice between butchery and stupidity; and he gripped the human's arm.

"Listen to me. If you do not keep my pace, I cannot keep you; and if I cannot keep you, I will kill you. It is also," he added, "very likely that the regul will kill you to keep you from your superior."

He slipped from cover then and drew the human with him by the arm, and Duncan came without resisting.

But the regul craft, lacing the area, swept back, and they made only a few strides before it was necessary to hurl themselves into other cover.

The barrage began again, deafening, spattering them with boiling water and gouts of mud.

The edun would be aware of this. They were doubtless doing something; perhaps—Niun thought—Duncan's sen'anth likewise knew and was doing something; and there was also *Ahanal*, yet independent of Intel.

He understood the human's helpless terror. Of all who had power on Kesrith, they two had least; and the regul, who did not fight, had taken up arms, impelled by malice or fear or whatever driving motive could span the gap between cowardice and self-interest.

XVII

There was firing, a sound unmistakable to a man who had lived a great part of his life in war.

Stavros turned his sled to view the window and saw the lights of aircraft circling under the clouds. His fingers sought the console keyboard, adjusted screens with what had grown to be some expertise; simple controls they were, a phenomenal series of coded signals, each memorized. The regul had provided him the codings with an attitude of smug contempt. "Learn it" they had challenged him with that look of theirs that classed beings of short memory with subsapients.

Stavros was not typical in this regard, had never been typical, not from his boyhood on remote Kiluwa, to his attachment to the XenBureau, to his directorate on Halley during first contact. He found nothing difficult in languages, nor in alien customs, nor in recognizing provincial short-sightedness, whether offered by humans or by others.

He was Kiluwan by allegiance, a distinction the regul and most humans did not appreicate. Kiluwa—remote, first-stage colony, populated by religious traditionalists among whom writing was a sin and education an obsession. He had been born there a century ago, before the peaceful, eccentric colony had become a casualty of the mri wars.

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A number of Kiluwans had distinguished themselves in Service; they were gone now, among casualties of forty years ago, retaliation for Nisren. Stavros survived. It was characteristic of his Kiluwan upbringing that he should be driven to understand the species that had ordered Kiluwa obliterated. Regul had done this, not mri. Therefore he studied the phenomenon of regul, who had minds much like the perfection Kiluwa had sought; and yet had destroyed all that Kiluwa had built. There was, as the university masters had once said, a "rhythm of justice" in this, a joining of canceling forces. Now a Kiluwan came to displace regul and the rhythm continued, binding them both.

He learned regul ways, looking for resolution to this; he observed meanness and coldness and self-seeking ambition, as well as reverence for mind. He had come from fear of regul to a yearning over them, with not a little of sorrow for Kiluwa, whose dream in the flesh had come to this flawed reality; and there were truths beyond what he had been able to grasp, vices and virtues inherent in the biology of regul. He saw these and began to understand, at least, constraints of species-perpetuation and population-control: division into hive-structures, breeking-elders and younglings, the docha that answered roughly to nations; he acquired suspicions about the value of treaties that bound, and yet did not bind, docha that had not been party to the agreement.

They had contracted with Hóln and suddenly found themselves dealing instead with Alagn; and Alagn honored the agreement.

Outwardly.

It had come to the point of truth. He had sat the long hours through the day and into dark and covered for Duncan's absence and committed every deception but the outright lie which the regul would not forgive. In the hours' passage he had grown more and more certain, first that Duncan had found something amiss, or he would have returned quickly, surely by the time dark gave him concealment; and then, when the fall of night did not bring him back, he became well sure that something amiss had found Duncan.

The pretences with the regul became charade bitterly difficult to maintain. Regul could murder the SurTac and blandly fail to mention it with the morning's reports. And there was not a human going to land on Kesrith without Stavros' clearance: not in peace, at least, not without removing all possible resistance.

The regul surely understood this.

He sat and listened to the firing, knowing while it continued that likely Duncan was still alive.

He had been a shaper of policy in his day, had settled a new world and founded a university; he had plotted strategies of diplomacy and war, had disposed of lives in numbers in which ships and crews were reckoned expendable, in which the likes of Sten Duncan perished in their hundreds.

But now he heard the firing, and clenched his right hand and agonized in a desperate attempt to move his unwilling left arm with any strength at all. He was held to the sled, constrained to be patient.

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There was new catastrophe at the port. There were hints in regul communications, into which he had intruded, that a ship had come down and that it was not friendly to regul.

Human, rival regul, or mri? He could guess well enough what had drawn Duncan to overstay his leave. Create no incident, he had told the lad, knowing then that there was little Duncan could do to create anything: I waited to happen, all about them. He had felt it increasingly, in the silences of the regul, in the tension in the atmosphere of the Nom.

The regul were trying something illicit. Human interests were endangered. And there would be no word of approval going from him to the human mission when it arrived, no matter what the coercion.

If it had not already arrived.

Stavros was not a man of precipitate action. He thought; and when he had concluded that chances were even, he was capable of rashness. He found no need to cooperate further with hosts that would either kill them or not dare to kill them. It was time to call their bluff.

He fingered the console, whipped the sled about and opened doors. He guided the machine through Duncan's apartment, and with a smooth, well-practiced series of commands, and a turn to the right, locked it into the tracking that ran the corridors.

Youngling regul saw him and gaped, jabbering protests which he ignored. He knew his commands, calculated the appropriate moves, locked into a turn and whisked into the side of the building that faced the port. There he stopped and keyed into the window controls, brightening windows, commanding storm shields withdrawn.

A new ship, indeed.

And lights glared over the countryside, flaring garishly in the haze of smoke and steam, aircraft lacing the ground with their beams.

Ah, Duncan, he thought with great regret.

A youngling puffed up to him. "Elder human," it said, "we regret, but—"

Bai Hulagh. Where? he demanded via the screen, a demand that visibly took the youngling aback. *Youngling, find me the bai.*

It fled, at least with what dispatch a regul could manage, and Stavros whipped the sled about and took it to the left, engaged a track and shot down the ramp, whisked around the corner and entered the first level of the Nom, from which he and Duncan had been carefully excluded.

Here he disengaged and went on manual, edging throught the gabbling crowd of younglings. *Mri*, he heard, and *mri ship*; and *alert*.

And they made way for him until one noticed that the sled, the symbol to them of adult authority, contained a human.

"Go back," they wished him. "Go back, elder."

Bai Hulagh. Now, he insisted, and would not move, and there was nothing they dared do about it.

When they began to murmur together in great confusion, he directed the sled through them and toured the ground floor in leisurely fashion, the air vibrating with the attack out on the flats and the building vibrating to the shocks. Men-

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tally he noted where doors were located, and where accesses were, and where it was possible to come and go with the sled.

A message flashed on his receiver.

It was Hulagh's signal. Hulagh's face followed. "Esteemed elder human," Hulagh said, "please return at once to your quarters."

I am unable to believe that they are secure, Stavros spelled out patiently. *Where is my assistant?*

"He has disregard our advice and is now involved in a situation," said Hulagh with remarkable candor, such that Stavros' hopes abruptly lifted. "Mri have landed, I regret to admit, honorable representative. These mri are outlaws, bent on making trouble. Your youngling is somewhere in the midst of things, quite contrary to our warnings. Please make our task easier by returning to the safety of your quarters."

I refuse. Stavros keyed a window clear. *I will observe from the utmost.* He would not, voluntarily, have surrendered his view through the windows, not trusting the limited one provided by regul services; but the barrage was intense and the windows rattled ominously, and he began to believe the bai's warning. The regul building was undergoing repeated shocks. He knew the bai's warning for an honest one.

It only remained to question what was happening to occasion the firing. The regul, he reminded himself, closing the storm shield, did not lie.

Therefore it was true that mri had landed and that Sten Duncan was somewhere out on the flats, but one never assumed anything with the regul.

Then the floor shook, and sirens wailed throughout the building.

Stavros locked the sled onto a track and whisked himself back to the main lobby, where a group of younglings frantically waved at him, trying to offer him instructions all at once.

"Shelter, reverence, shelter!" they said, pointing at another hall, a ramp leading down. He considered and thought that it might at the moment be wise to listen.

XVIII

Duncan was spent, a burden, a hazard. Niun set hands on him and pushed him downslope, to shelter under an overhang by a boiling pool, forcing him further under as he wedged his own body after.

It was scantly in time. A near burst of fire hissed across the water and crumbled rock near them: blind fire, not aimed. The searching beams continued, lacing the area. Niun saw the face of Duncan in the reflected light, haggard and swollen-eyed—his vision unprotected by the membrane that hazed Niun's own when the smoke grew thick. Duncan's upper lip showed a black trail that was blood in the dim light. It poured steadily, a nuisance that had become more than nuisance. The human heaved with a bubbling cough and tried to stifle it.

The reek in the air from the firing, and from the natural steam and

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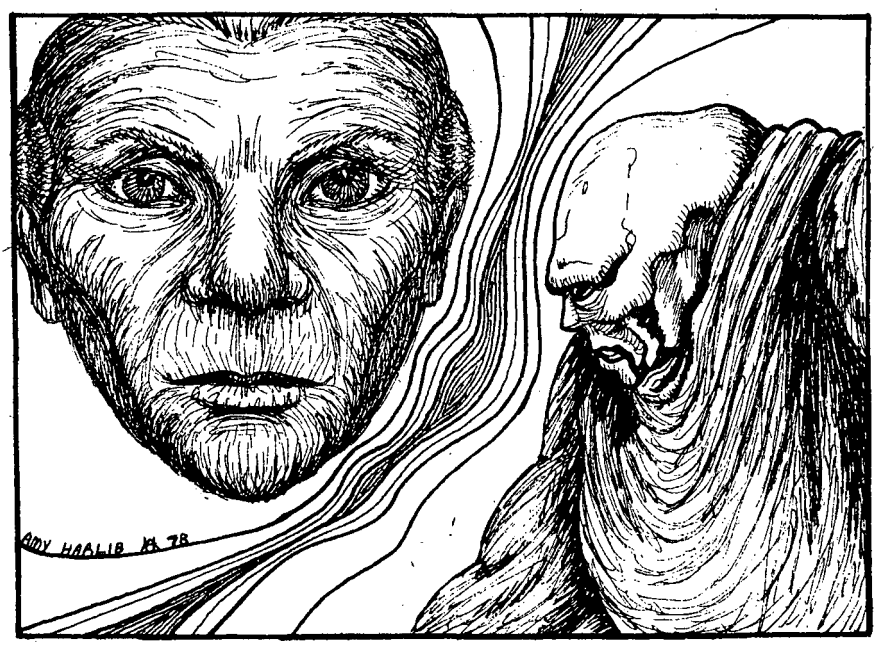
sulphur, was thick and choking. Niun twisted in the narrow confines, fastidious about touching the bleeding and sweating human, and at last, exhausted, abandoned niceties in such close quarters. They lay in a space likely to become their tomb should another shot crumble the ledge over them, mri and human bones commingled for future possessors of Kesrith to wonder at.

This was delirium. The mind could not function under such pounding shocks as bracketed them constantly. Niun found the regul amazing in their ineptitude. They two should have been dead over and over, had the regul had any knowledge of the land; but the regul had not, and were firing blind at a landscape as unknown and alien to them as the bottom of the sea. The world was lit in constant flares of white and red, swirled in mists and steam and smoke and clouds of dust, like the Hell that humans swore by; that of mri was an unending Dark.

The water splashed, singing and bubbling. Niun lowered the visor of the *zaidhe*, he the outermost, shielding the human with his own body: ironic arrangement, chance-chosen, one he would have reversed at the moment if it were possible.

An explosion heaved the earth, numbed the senses, drove their numbed bodies into fresh convulsions of terror.

And hard upon that a white light lit the rocks, grew, ate them, devoured all the world; and a pressure unbearable; and Niun knew that they were hit, and tried to move to roll out into the open before the ledge came down. The pressure burst over him, and it was red. . . .



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* * *

. . . .wind, wind in great force, skirling away the smoke and mist, causing the red to swirl before his membraned, visored eyes. Niun moved, became aware that he moved, and that he lived.

And all about was light, sullen and ugly red.

He gathered himself up, and turned toward the source of the light, and saw the port.

There was nothing.

He stood, his legs shuddering beneath him. He thought that he cried out, so great was his pain; and he shut his eyes, and opened them, trying to see through the flame, until the tears poured down his face. But of *Ahanal*, of *Hazan*, there was nothing to be seen. Within the city itself fires blazed, sending smoke boiling aloft.

And even as he watched, an aircraft lifted from near the horizon, circled for a distance out to sea, and came back again, lights blinking lazily.

He followed it with his eyes, the aircraft circling, rounding over the city, through the smoke, beginning to come about toward the hills.

Toward the edun.

He wished to turn his face from it, knowing, knowing already the end. He turned with it, watched, a great knot swelling in his throat, and his body cold and numb, and the center of him utterly alive to what began to happen.

The first tower of the edun, that of the Kel, flared in light and went, slowly tumbling. The sound reached him, a numbing shock, and after that came the wind as the towers fell, as the whole structure of the edun hung suspended and crumbled down into ruin.

And the ship circled, light and free, lazily winking in the dark as it rose above the smoke and came, insolently, over their heads.

His pistol was in his hands. He turned and lifted it and fired one futile burst at those retreating lights, none others in the sky. The lights blurred in his eyes, the betraying membrane, or tears. It flashed and cleared, and he fired again.

And the lights continued on for a moment; and a red light blossomed, and fragments went spinning in various trajectories, ruin upon ruin: pistol shot, or the turbulence that must be surrounding the port.

It healed nothing. He turned, looked again at the edun where not even flames remained, and his stomach spasmed, a wrench that weakened his joints and made him dizzy. In that moment he would have wished to be without senses, to be weak, to fall, to sink down, to do anything but continue to stand, helpless.

Dead. Dead, all of them.

He stood, not knowing whether to return to the ruin at the port, to go on as he was going, or whether there was reason to go, or to do anything but sit where he was until morning, when the regul would come to finish matters. He found no limit to what senses could absorb. He felt. He was not numb. He only wished to be, battered by the wind that stole the sound from the night, whipping at his robes, a steady snap of cloth that was, here, louder than the silence that had fallen over everything.

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The People were dead.

He remained. For survivors there were duties, respects, rites that wanted doing. He was not of Medai's temperament.

He slipped the pistol into its holster, and clenched his icy hands under his arms, and began to reckon with the living.

The Hand of the People, a kel'en; and there were his kin to bury, if the regul had not done it in killing them, and after that there was a war the regul perhaps did not expect to fight.

And then he looked toward the ledge, and looked on his human prisoner, and met his eyes. Here also was a man that waited to die, that also knew, in small measure, what desolation was.

He could kill the human, and be alone thereafter, only himself in a vast, vast silence: a tiny act of violence after the forces that had stormed across the skies of Kesrith and ruined the world.

A tiny and miserable act. Vengeance for a world deserved something of equal stature.

"Get up," he said quietly, and Duncan gathered himself up, shoulder to the rock, staring back at him.

"We will go up to the hill," he told Duncan. "The house of my people—I do not think there will be more aircraft."

Duncan turned and looked, and without demur, without question, started walking ahead of him.

The world was changed about them. Landmarks that had been on the Dus-plain for eons were gone. The ground was pocked with scars that filled with boiling water. Duncan, leading the way, blind, bound, misstepped and went in up to the knee, with nothing more than a hoarse sob of shock; and Niun seized him and pulled him back, steadying him, while the human stood and gasped for air.

He kept a hand on Duncan's arm thereafter, and guided him, knowing the way; and preserved the human against another time.

The light came, the red light of Arain, foul and murky. Niun looked back toward the port, and saw in the first light the full truth of what he had already known: that nothing survived.

Neither *Ahanal* nor *Hazan*.

And when he looked on the hill where the Edun of the People had stood, it was one with the sand and the rocks, as if nothing built by hands had ever stood there.

He saw also in that light what prize he had taken, an exhausted creature that struggled for every upward step, whose face and mouth and chest were spattered with blood that poured afresh from the nose; injury or atmosphere, it was uncertain. The eyes were almost shut, streaming tears not of seeming emotion but of outraged tissues—a face naked in the sun, and indecent, and more bewildered than evil. He did not know why the human kept walking at such cost, toward such little reward; easier by far the death of the land's violence than what mri and human had exchanged for forty years.

But there was a point past which there was no thinking, knowing only the fact that one lived; and that one continued to live whether one wanted to or whether one wished otherwise.

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He understood such a mind, that deep shock which admitted no decisions. He had never thought that he would freeze in crisis; yet he had frozen, and the cold of that moment when the People died was still locked around his mind and his heart and seemed never apt to go away, not though he had revenge, not though he killed every regul that breathed, and heaped humanity on the desolation as well.

It was a shock in which their two lives were of like value, which was nothing at all.

He pushed the human ahead, neither hating now nor pitying, finding no reason for sparing a human when he had the ruin of the edun to face for himself. He thought that perhaps Duncan sorrowed for his own failed duty, which lay lost in burning Kesrith; that Duncan also mourned failure, as miserable as he.

But Duncan had all the human worlds for kinsmen, knowing that they survived; and it was possible to hate the human when he let himself think on this. He would not return this one to his kind: while he lived, Duncan would live. While he had to face what had become of Kesrith, the man Duncan would do the like.

* * *

They came to the edun by full daylight, untroubled by ships or any sign of life from the skies. Down in the city there might be such activity; it did not extend to them. When Niun thought of it, he thought of going down and destroying them —methodically, joylessly: regul, who had no capacity for war.

Who had finally, in one cowardly act, destroyed the People.

There was irony there that was worth bitter laughter. He looked on the mound of rubble that had been the edun and felt moved to that or to tears; and Duncan, no longer forced to walk, simply slumped to his knees and leaned against the shoulder of the causeway. Niun heard his hollow cough and kicked him gently, reached down when that was not enough to rouse him, and caught his arm, pulling him up again.

There was work to be done, at least as far as they could try; and he was loath to have the ruin touched at all by tsi'mri hands, but he had not the strength alone. He drew the *av-tlen* and pried loose the knots at Duncan's wrists with its point, carefully unwound the thongs that were embedded in Duncan's swollen flesh, and looped the recovered leather through its ring on his own belts.

Duncan, trying to work his hands to life, looked at the edun, and looked at him, a question. Niun jerked his head in response and Duncan comprehended and began to walk.

They waded through rubble, stepped carefully among chunks of the walls that were cast down and shattered. Here had been simple fire, not the radiation that doubtless bathed the city and made the place uninhabitable. Niun pushed at a heap of rubble that blocked their way, and saw that beneath that pile of heavy stone and fine dust lay at least one of the Kel.

There was no use to move that mass, no hope of moving it entirely. Instead Niun took stones and

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began to heap them around the visible body like a cairn, and Duncan, seeing what he was about, began to gather up rocks of the proper size and pass them on to him.

This offended Niun bitterly, that the human offered aid rather than suffered compulsion; but it was needed, and he would not allow the human to touch the grave itself. And it occurred to him at the same moment that Duncan might well smash his skull with one of those self-same stones the moment he turned his back entirely, and that this might be what the human was preparing, so he kept from turning his head while he worked.

They finished, and from this place they went deeper into the ruin and into places dark and difficult, where heaps of rubble towered overhead and sifted dust and pebbles downslope at them. And at the core of the deepest ruin was the Shrine that he now sought.

It was all too deeply buried.

Had it been possible, he would have sought out whatever relics he could have carried and taken them away into the sanctity of Sil'athen, where his kinsmen also would have been buried; but perhaps humans would never be curious enough to desecrate this place with their machines, to sift out the debris and leavings of a species that no longer mattered in the universe.

And here the destruction reached that central citadel of himself that had yet to feel it; and he trembled and his senses almost left him. He reached out and sought support, and touched the wrong stone, bringing a slide that buried the place at their feet and brought a sift of powder down on them. The only thing he saw clearly was Duncan's face, terror in his eyes as for an instant they seemed likely to go under that weight of rubble and earth; and then the sifting stopped and the place grew still.

A stone shifted somewhere, and another; there was another slide, and silence, the fall of a few pebbles.

And in that silence came a thin and distant cry.

Duncan heard it: If not for that confirming glance sideward, Niun would have thought it illusion. But it came from the direction that had been Kath, where the deepest storerooms were.

He turned and began to pick his way through the ruin, careful, careful with his life now, and that of her who had cried aloud, down there in the dark.

"Melein!" he cried, and paused and listened, and that same thin sound returned to him.

He reached the place, estimating where it lay, and a wall had fallen there, and finer rubble sifted atop it; but the steel, regul-made doors had held.

Too well. They were barred by a weight that could not be moved, that they lacked tools to chip away and machines to lift. Niun tore his hands on it, and his muscles cracked, and Duncan added his force, but it would not slide; and at last they both sat down, gasping for air, coughing. Duncan's nose started pouring blood again. He wiped it in a bloody smear and his hands were shaking uncontrollably.

"Is it," Duncan asked, "ventilated down there?"

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It was not. It added a fear atop the others.

"Melein," Niun called out. "Melein, do you hear?"

He heard some manner of answer, and it was a woman's voice and a young voice; high and thin and clear: It was Melein. He reckoned it below them, and tried to figure the exact location of it, and marked with a heel a spot on the floor.

Then he wrenched a reinforcing rod from the ruin and began with careful chips to dig—no firing down into that sanctuary, no such recklessness. He dug with that and with his fingers, and Duncan saw what he was doing and helped him, alternating strokes that pounded deeper into the cubit-thick flooring, and now and again they paused to paw away the dust they had made.

The sun grew hot, and the only sound now was the steady chink of steel on the cemented earth; and he had heard no word from Melein in a very long time. He was tormented with fear, knowing how small the space below was, how scant the air must be; and fear lest the gap they were making miss the small space where she was sheltered; and fear lest the whole floor give way.

They broke through. Air flooded out of that blackness, stale and depleted and cold.

"Melein," he shouted down, and had no answer.

He began to work yet harder, ramming chips from the edges of the hole, widening it, admitting more and more air, sending a shaft of sunlight down into that place. They exposed steel rods and worked in the other direction, where they could make a wider hole, and from time to time he would call down to her, and hear nothing.

It was at last of a size to admit a body; and he considered it, and the human who would remain above, and how they were to get up again, and thought desperately of killing Duncan; but he could not come up with Melein in his arms, not so easily; and he was not sure whether the cloth of his robes could bear his weight, or what else might avail.

"I will go down," said Duncan, and opened a pocket and took out a length of cord, and from another a small light. He offered these precious things with a naive forthrightness that for a moment disarmed Niun.

"The drop," Niun said, inwardly shuddering at the thought of the human near Melein, "is my height and half again."

He did not add what revenge he would take if Duncan were careless, if he harmed Melein, if he could not recover her alive: These things were useless to ponder. He sat, helpless, and watched as Duncan worked his body—a little heavier than his own—into that gap and dropped, with a heavy sound, into the dark.

Niun listened as he searched below, through things that rattled and moved, through the shifting of rock. He leaned close and tried to see the tiny glow of the light that Duncan held.

"I have found her." The words floated up out of that cold. And then: "She's alive."

Niun wept, safe, where the human could not see him; and wiped his eyes and sat still, fists

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clenched on his knees. He knew that the human could claim her for hostage, could harm her, could exact revenge or some terrible oath of him; he had not thought through these things clearly, a measure of his exhaustion and his desperation to reach her in time; but now he thought, and poised himself on the edge of the pit, to go down.

"Mri! Niun!" Duncan stood in the light with a pale burden in his arms, a bundle of gold robes that lay still against him. "Let down the cord. I will try to guide her up."

Even as he watched, Melein stirred, and moved, and her eyes opened on the light in which he above could be only a shadow.

"Melein," he called down. "Melein, we will pull you up. This is a human, Melein, but do not fear him."

She struggled when she heard that, and Duncan set her feet on the floor. Niun saw her look at his face in the dim light and draw back in horror.

But she suffered him then to put his hands on her waist, and to lift her up, by far the easiest and least hurtful way for her; but she could not lift her hands to reach Niun's, and protested pain—she once kel'e'en.

"Wait," Niun objected, and with a turn of cord and a knot, fashioned a sling and cast it down. He wrapped it about hand and arm and took the weight carefully as she settled in the sling he had made. Duncan helped lift, but for a time the thin, cutting cord and an upward pull bit into Niun's hands. He tried not to rake her against the jagged opening, and pulled ever so carefully, and braced his feet and ignored the pain of his hands.

But at last she came through and levered herself out onto the sunlit dust, tried to rise. He had her, he had her safe; and he hugged her to her feet and held to her as he had held to no living being since childhood, they both entangled in the cord. He brushed dust and tears from her face, she still gasping in the outside air.

"The ship is destroyed," he said, to have all the cruelty done with while wounds were still numb. "Everyone else is dead, unless there is someone else alive down there."

"No. None. They had no time. They were too old to run—they would not—they sat still, with the she'pan. Then the House. . . ."

She began to shake as if in the grip of a great cold; but she was once of the Kel, and she did not break. She controlled herself, and after a moment began to disentangle them both from the cord.

"None," he said, to be sure she understood it all, "could have possibly survived on the ship."

She sat down on the edge of the section of wall that blocked the doors, and smoothed back her mane with one hand, her head bowed. She found her torn scarf at her shoulder and smoothed it and carefully covered her head with that light, gauze veil. She was quiet for a time, her face still turned from him.

At last she straightened her shoulders and pointed over to the hole in the rubble, where Duncan waited. "And what is he?" she asked.

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Niun shrugged. "No matter to us. A human. A regul guest. They tried to kill him when we met; then. . . ."

The surmise that it was this, partly his own action, that had killed the People and left them orphan, was too terrible to speak. His voice trailed off, and Melein arose and walked from him, to look at the ruin, her back to him, her hands limp at her sides. The sight of her despair was like a wound to him.

"Melein," he said to her. "Melein, what am I to do?"

She turned to him, gave a tiny, helpless gesture. "I am nothing."

"What am I to do?" he insisted.

Sen and Kel: Sen must lead; but she had become more than Sen, and that was the heaviness on her, which he saw she did not want, which she had to bear. He stood waiting. At last she shut her eyes and opened them again.

"Enemies will come here," she said, beginning clearly to function as she had been prepared for years to function, to command and to plan. She assumed what she must assume, she'pan of the People, who had no people. "Find us what we need for the hills, and we will camp there tonight. Give me tonight, truebrother—I must not call you that; but tonight, that only, and I will think what is best for us to do."

"Rest," he urged her. "I will do that."

And when he had seen her seated and out of the direct sun, he bent down over the hole and cast the cord down.

"Duncan."

The human's white face appeared in the center of the light, anxious and frightened. "Lift me up," he said, laying hand on the cord, which Niun refused to give solidity. "Mri, I have helped you. Now lift me out of here."

"Search for the things I name and I will draw them up by the cord. And after that I will draw you up."

Duncan hesitated there, as if he thought that, like humans, a mri would lie. But he agreed then, and sought with his tiny light until he had found all the things that Niun requested of him. He tied each small bundle onto the cord for Niun to draw up: food, and waterflasks, and cording and four bolts of unsewn black cloth, for they could not reach better without delaying to pierce a new opening, and Duncan avowed he did not think it safe.

A last time the cord came up, bearing a bolt of cloth; and a last time Niun cast it down, this time for Duncan, and braced it about his body and his arm.

It was not as difficult as with Melein's uncooperating weight. He leaned and braced his feet, and Duncan hauled himself up—gained the lip of the hole and heaved himself to safety, panting, bent double, coughing and trying to stop the bleeding. The coughing went on and on, and Melein came from her place of rest to look down on the human in mingled disgust and pity.

"It is the air," Niun said. "He has been running, and he is not acclimated to Kesrith."

"Is he a manner of kel'en?" asked Melein.

"Yes," Niun said. "But he does not offer any threat. The regul

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hunted him; likely now they would cease to care—unless this man's superior is still alive. What shall we do with him?"

Duncan seemed to know they spoke of him; perhaps he knew a few words of the language of the People, but they spoke the High Language, and surely he could not follow that.

Melein shrugged, turned her head from him. "As you please. We will go now."

And she began, slowly, to walk through the ruin, picking her way with care.

"Duncan," said Niun, "pick up the supplies and come."

The human looked outrage at him, as if minded to dispute this order as a matter of dignity; and Niun expected it, waited for it. But then Duncan knelt down and with the cord made a bundle of goods, heaving it to his shoulder as he arose.

Niun indicated that he should go, and the human carried the burden where Niun aimed him, his footsteps weaving and uncertain in the wake of Melein.

* * *

No firing had touched the hills. They came into a sheltered place that was as it had been before the attack, before the discords of regul or mri or humans—a shelter safe from airships, withdrawn as it was beneath a sandstone ledge.

With a great sigh Melein sank down on the sand in that cold shadow, and bent, her head against her knees, as if this had been all that she could do, the last step that she could take. She was hurt. Niun had watched her walk and knew that she was in great pain, that he thought was in her side and not her limbs. When she was content to stop, he took the supplies from Duncan and made haste to spread a cloth for a groundsheet and a cover for Melein. He gave her drink, and a bit of dried meat, and watched, sitting on his heels, as she drank and ate and leaned against the bare rock to rest.

"May I drink?"

The human's quiet request reminded him he had another charge on him; and he measured out a capful of water and passed it to Duncan's shaking hands.

"Tomorrow maybe," said Niun, "we will tap a luin and have water enough to drink."

He considered the human, who drank at the water drop by drop, a haggard and filthy creature who by appearances ought not to have survived so far. It was not likely that he could survive much further as he was. He stank, sweat and sulphur compounded with human. Niun found himself hardly cleaner.

"Can you—" he said to Melein, almost having forgotten that her personal name was not for him to speak freely now. He offered her his pistol. "Can you stay awake long enough to watch this human a time?"

"I am well enough," she said, and drew up on one knee and rested wrist and pistol on it in an attitude more kel'e'en than she'pan. By caste, she should not touch weapons; but many things ought to be different, and could not be.

Niun left them so and went out of

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sight of the ledge, and stripped and bathed, as mri on dry worlds did, in the dry sand, even to his mane which, when he shook the sand out, recovered its glossy feel quickly enough. He felt better when he had done these things, and he dressed again, and began to retrace his steps toward the cave.

A heavy body moved behind him, an explosive breath and plaintive sound: dus. He turned carefully, for he had left his gun with Melein, and nothing else could give a ha-dus pause.

It was the *miuk'ko,* gaunt, forlorn, scab-hided. But the face was dry and it shambled forward with careless abandon.

Niun's heart beat rapidly; the situation was a bad one in potential, for all the dusei were unpredictable. But the dus came to him and lifted its head, thrusting it against his chest, uttering that dus-master sound that begged food, shelter, whatever things mri and dus shared.

He knelt down there, for the moment demanded it, and embraced the scrofulous neck and relaxed against the beast, letting it touch and be touched. A sense of warmth came over him, a feeling deep and almost sensual mingling with the lower beast-functions of the dus-mind, that could be content with very little.

This the dus lent him. He looked up then, aware of presence, and saw two stranger-dusei on the sandstone ridge above; he was not afraid. This dus knew them, and they knew him, and this knowing, like the warmth, came at a level too low for reason. It was fact. It was as dependable as the rock on which they stood, mri and dus. Thus the creature absorbed his pain, and melted it, and fed him back strength as slow and powerful as its own.

And when he made his way back to the cave, the great beast lumbered after him, a docile companion, a comical and friendly fellow that—beholding the human—was suddenly neither comic nor friendly.

Distrust: That reached Niun's mind through the impulses of the dus; but that subsided as the dus felt the human's outright terror. This one feared. Therefore he was safe. The dus put thought of the human aside and settled down athwart the entrance, radiating impulses of ward and protection.

"He came," said Niun, gathering his pistol from Melein's hand. "There are more out there, but none even vaguely familiar."

"The old pact," she said, "is still valid with us and them."

And he knew that they might have no better guardian; and that he could sleep this night, sure that nothing would pass the dus to harm Melein. He was overwhelmingly grateful for this. The exhaustion he had held back came down like a flood. The dus lifted his head and gave that pleasure-moan, a gap-mouthed smile, tongue lolling. It flicked across the lips and disappeared into a dusine smugness.

Niun spoke to it, using the small nonsense-words the dusei loved, and touched its massive head, pleasing it; and then he took its paw and, turned it, the size of it more than a man could easily hold in his hands. The claws curled inward, drawing his wrist against the dewclaw: reflex. It broke the skin, admitting the

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venom. Niun had sought this. It would not harm him in such a small dose; by similar degrees he would become immune to this particular dus, and need never fear it. He took his hand back and caressed the flat skull, bringing a rumbling sound of contentment from the beast.

Then, because he could not bear the thought of bedding down with the human's filth, he took up an armload of cloth and bade the human come with him, and took him out beyond the ledge.

"Bathe," he told Duncan, and casting down the cloth when Duncan seemed dismayed, he bent and with a handful of sand on his own arm, demonstrated how. He sat with arms folded, eyes generally averted somewhat, as the human cleansed himself; and the curious ha-dusei watched from the heights, grouping and circling in alarm at sight of the strange, pale-skinned creature.

Duncan looked rather more pleasant when he had scrubbed the blood from his face and the tear-streaks had been evened out to a dusty sameness. He shook the sand from his hair and picked up his discarded clothing and started to dress, but Niun tore a length from the cloth and tore it in such a way that it could be worn. He thrust it at the human, who doubtfully put it on, as if this were some intended shame to him.

Then Niun thought to search the clothing that the human had taken off, and found pockets full of things of which the human had not spoken. He opened his hand, demonstrating the knife that he had found. Duncan shrugged.

Niun gave him credit at least that he had not attempted any rashness, but bided his time. The human had played the round well, though he had lost it.

Niun thrust a second wad of black cloth at him. "Veil yourself," he said. "Your nakedness offends the she'pan and me."

Duncan settled the veil over his head, ineptly attempting to make it stay, for he had not the art. Niun showed him how to twist it to make a band of it, and how to arrange the veil; and Duncan looked the better for it, decently covered. He was not robed as kel'en, which would have been improper; but he was in kel-black and modestly clothed as a man and not as an animal. Niun looked on him with a nod of approval.

"This is better for you," he said. "It will protect your skin. Bury your clothing. You will find when we travel in the day that our way is best."

"Are we moving?"

Niun shrugged. "The she'pan makes that decision. I am kel'en. I take her orders."

Duncan dropped to his knees and dug a hole, animal fashion, and put his discarded clothing in it. He paused when he had smoothed it over, and looked up.

"And if I could offer you a safe way off this world—"

"Can you?"

Duncan rose to his feet. He had a new dignity, veiled. Niun had never noticed the color of his eyes. They were light brown. Niun had never seen the like.

"I could find a way," Duncan said, "to contact my people and get a ship down here for you. I think

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you have something to lose by not taking that offer. I think you would like very much to get her out of this."

Niun moved his hand to his weapons, warning. "Tsi'mri, you do assume too much. And if you make plans, present them to her, not to me. I told you: I am only kel'en. If something pleases her, I do it. If something annoys her, I remove it."

Duncan did not move. Presumably he reconsidered his disrespect. "I do not understand," he said finally. "Evidently I don't understand how things are with you. Is this your wife?"

The obscenity was so naively put, in so puzzled a tone, that Niun almost laughed in surprise. "No," he said, and to further confound the human: "She is my Mother."

And he motioned Duncan to cease delaying him; he grew anxious for Melein, and there were the ha-dusei about them, that snuffed the air and called soft cries from their higher perch. One came down as they left the area. Doubtless the clothes would not stay buried, but neither would there be much left of them to catch the eye of searchers.

The dus at the entry of their refuge lifted his head and pricked his tiny ears forward at their approach, radiating feelings of welcome; and Niun, already sensing the flush of the poison within himself, and knowing he would feel it stronger in the hours of the night, offered his fingers to its nose and brushed past, putting his body between it and Duncan.

Melein took note of the human and nodded in approval of the change; but no further interest in him did she show this night. She settled down to rest in peace now that they had returned. And Niun drank a very small ration of water and lay down and watched as the human likewise stretched himself out as far from them and the beast as he might in the little space.

In time Niun let his eyes close, his mind full, so over-burdened that at last there was nothing to do but abandon all thought and let go. The dus-fever was in him. He drifted toward low-mind dreams that were the murky, sometimes frightening, impulses of the dus; but he feared no harm from the impulses because it was in the lore of the Kel that no kel'en had ever been harmed by his own dus, it being sane.

And he was owned by this beast, and the beast by him; and he compassed his present world by this and by Melein. He had been utterly desolate in the morning, and at this evening he rested, kel-ignorant, with a dus to guard his sleep and touch his mind, and with once more a she'pan to take up the burden of planning. His heart was pained for Melein's burden, but he did not try to bear it. She would have her honor. He had his, and it was vastly more simple.

To obey the she'pan. To avenge the People.

He stared at the human during his waking intervals and once, in the dark, he knew that the human was awake and looking at him. They did not speak.

TO BE CONCLUDED

* * *

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Is seeing believing? It all depends on what you mean by *seeing*! Take Sodom and Gomorrah, for example. . . .

THE SHRIEKER, to Tarpi's delight, landed squarely atop the treated sugar cube. It slowly rotated on its pudgy legs, its goatee of sensory hairs wiggling as it examined the top surface and edges of the cube.

Tarpi began to recite "How Doth the Little Busy Bee" as he watched. He had reached "How cheerfully he seems to grin," having wandered into another poem along the way, when the shrieker gave a tiny cry like a terrified field mouse, spread its wing, and rose into the air, the sugar cube pinched tightly between two rows of legs.

Tarpi watched until it vanished from sight behind a tree, then turned to his companion and said, "Okay, give me the box-box now, Hester."

Hester was four feet high and resembled a chimpanzee. She had scaly, straw-yellow skin blotched with green. A particularly large blotch on her flat chest could, with considerable imagination, be construed to resemble a capital A. Her face consisted of a large, rigid mouth with which she also breathed; and a broad band of black velvet stretched across the area where a chimpanzee normally has eyes. An inflated balloon of skin beneath the chin completed the picture.

"Hester" was not how she was usually identified, of course, but since it apparently pleased Tarpi to do so, she was too polite to mention it. She handed him the "box-box."

The remote display showed Tarpi a dense cluster of red dots moving slowly over a schematic landscape. Each dot represented the location of one of the tiny transmitters with which the sugar cube was doped. When the sugar was eaten by the shrieker's mound-mates, each would ingest a transmitter or two as well—and thus broadcast its location for a few days.

And if a person had a pair of highly directional receivers and a fairly bright computer like, say, the receivers he had spent most of the morning setting up, plus the computer back at base camp, then he could obtain a lot of information about the shriekers' habits very quickly. It beat hell out of daubing their backs with paint and following them around, but Tarpi sometimes felt the advantage was nullified by having to suffer through myriad obscene jokes based on his being a "bug-bugger."

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He followed the shrieker's progress for several minutes when a drop of rain falling onto the display screen diverted his attention. Between tree trunks he could see out onto the rolling prairie that surrounded the grove. To the north an approaching squall line had darkened the sky from gray near the Zenith to black, shot with livid green, near the horizon.

As he watched, a double fork of lightning arced down to assault the prairie. Tarpi decided that he was in for a good soaking and cursed himself for not having brought weather gear. He scooted over a few feet so that the strut of the buttress tree he had been leaning against arched over him, providing some shelter. A few large, economy-sized raindrops plopped down nearby.

The balloon under Hester's chin shivered and she spoke in a continuous buzz, E above middle C, without pauses between words: "Bad storm comming Tarpi four twisting winds should go inside now."

"Not twisting winds—tornadoes," he corrected her absently, intent on the display screen. He had already made his own prediction; he had seen several of these storms before.

Hester tugged at his sleeve. "Please must go *now* Tarpi tornadoes come very soon." Random raindrops continued to plop down around them.

"We're just going to get rained on a little is all, Hester. Get in here under the tree if it bothers you."

The shrieker had apparently reached its mound; its location had remained steady for several minutes. Tarpi set the display down and reached for his notetaper.

Hester snatched up both display and recorder and ran off through the grove.

"Hey, come back here with that! Here, Hester! Come here!"

He was more surprised than angry; none of the Chimps had ever shown any signs of aggression before. He scrambled to his feet, scraping his forehead on the tree strut overhead, and set off after Hester, who by now had a twenty-yard start.

There was a sharp crack of thunder and a rolling barrage of rain overtook them, the huge drops rattling through the crisp yellow leaves of the buttress trees, making more noise than Tarpi would have believed. It sounded like a hailstorm in a furniture factory.

Hester's smaller size and greater agility enabled her to pass through the intermingled buttress struts more easily than Tarpi, so she gained steadily. However, she soon ran out of the grove and onto the green matted prairie, where Tarpi's longer legs gave him the advantage. At the top of a low hill he caught up with her and swung her around by an arm. The display and recorder dropped to the waterlogged turf.

"Now what the hell is this!" He was almost angry now—his head was beginning to ache and he was soaked.

"Tornadoes Tarpi."

She pointed to the top of the grove. Like the legs of a lopsided elephant, four tornadoes swept down from the brutal black sky to the green prairie. As Tarpi watched, the nearest passed over a small

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patch of cottonweed and plucked it to bare stalks. Now that they were out of the clatter of rain on leaf, he was conscious of a low, dull rumbling like a distant ore-crusher. The tornadoes twisted slowly toward them.

The wind suddenly freshened, gusting cold on Tarpi's soaked skin. Hester was squirming in his grasp.

"Must go *now* Tarpi."

"Damn right."

He released her and followed her down the far side of the hill, the wind at their backs hurrying them along. Another grove lapped up against the foot of the hill. Hester lead them into and through it, up another hill and then down into a tiny valley that had been carved out by a small stream trickling down its center. Hester thrashed through the dense growth of red-shot green grass on either bank and forded the stream without slowing.

Tarpi sloshed to a halt just short of the place where the normal broadleafed groundcover ended and the ohhell weed started. He had discovered the weed and inadvertently given it its name when he stumbled into it for a second time. He had every intention of avoiding a third dose.

Hester was halfway up the far side of the valley before she noticed that he was no longer following her. She turned around and went back.

"Please Tarpi hurry." He could hear her dimly over the wind and rain and tornado growl.

Both banks were covered with red-shot green as far as he could see. The wind gave a particularly violent thrust, driving an iced raindrop into his ear just as Hester

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waded into the far edge of the stream.

"Oh, hell." Tarpi stepped out into the weed. Hester turned again to lead the way.

As they crested the far rim of the valley, Tarpi caught sight of their destination, a grove of large buttress trees snuggled in a valley on the far side of the divide. Built in under and around the trees was a collection of small, free-form wooden houses. It was a Chimp village.

The rain stopped but the wind was gusting so violently that Tarpi staggered drunkenly as he panted down the last slope. Hester, in the lead, picked a low house built around the base of a huge buttress, stopped to kiss the lintel and entered. Tarpi, the rumble of the tornado loud behind him, went down on all fours and entered without ceremony. Someone slammed a heavy wooden door behind him, dulling the wind's shriek and the tornadoes' roar and cutting off the light from outside.

"Greetings to my home Tarpi." The light leaking through the cracks around the door and the shutters was not sufficient for Tarpi to see his host.

"Thanks," he gasped.

Suddenly it sounded as though a waterfall were pounding on the roof of the house. The shutters banged against their latches; small stones and dirt shot through every gap in the walls. Then the roaring increased further until it seemed to drill straight into Tarpi's ears with lancets of pain. He opened his mouth wide and tensed his throat muscles. His ears popped and the pain vanished. The roaring continued for only seconds, then died abruptly, and his ears stabbed at him again. The tornado tossed in a few more stones as a parting shot and then—as well as Tarpi's benumbed hearing could judge—all was quiet.

His eyes had adjusted enough that he could see dimly by the light that leaked around the door and shutters. He could make out what he assumed were Hester and a half a dozen of her friends, all unmoving, in relaxed postures, comotose. Tarpi decided they were probably just stunned and blinded by the noise levels they had just experienced. When you "see" by sonar, close contact with a tornado must be akin to a laser flash in the eyes. The harmonics would have affected them even though there was not much output in the thirty-thousand-cycle range they used.

He crawled over to a window, again bumping his head when he forgot the low ceiling, and unlatched the shutters. The sun, low under a shelf of clouds, poured sickly yellow light into the house, making him blink. The scene outside reminded him of the underside of a set of bleachers. The buttress trees, now almost totally denuded of leaves, were an angular collection of struts and uprights, but they had apparently sustained little structural damage. The village also seemed unhurt, although to human eyes Chimp villages always looked cluttered and unfinished. Being unable to perceive color, their inhabitants made use of sculpture and carving for decoration; the sculpture generally represented plants or animals and was crudely done. The surfaces

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of the houses were either left rough or coarsely carved in haphazard geometrical patterns, and boards were not of standard sizes or closely fitted. The whole effect was rather slapdash.

The door in an A-frame across the way swung open and two Chimps stumbled out looking none too light on their feet but none the worse for wear. Tarpi could hear his hosts starting to move around behind him, and he—

His left instep burst into flame.

"Oh, hell!"

A second locus started on his right foot as the first spread to encircle his ankle. It started itching as well. He was in for an extremely uncomfortable few hours as the rings of fire would work their way slowly up his body. Evidently his previous exposures had not lessened his sensitivity, but there was a tube of calpermine lotion in the health kit back at camp that could help—if it had not blown away.

He scrambled through the low door and set off at a dead run.

II

The expedition's base camp was a two-hundred-foot circle of ultra-tough monomolecular film, the edges buried deep, the sides bulged upward into a low dome by a permanent static charge. Varicolored opaque and translucent patches gave it the look, from a distance, of a huge fungus growing out of the prairie.

In an equipment-cluttered room beneath a round, clear patch near the center of the dome sat a chunky, dark-haired woman, mildly chiding a persnickity computer.

"Come on now, Marvel. Stop that." She pressed the "Program" key again and repeated, slowly and carefully: "Make radio check of status of all expedition members on remote duty."

"Unintelligible command," the computer replied. Its voice always reminded Allis of a Chimp's voice; it had the same buzzing, continuous quality.

She thought for a moment and then tried once more: "Make radio check of *condition* of all expedition members on remote duty."

"Running," Marvel responded and rewarded her with a light show, listing the name of each expedition member plus columns for each of several possible conditions. As Allis watched, some of the X's moved from "Contact Not Yet Made" to "Condition Satisfactory."

'Dumm and 'Dee came over from the opposite side of the room—they had been fiddling with a freeze-dried gryphon specimen—to watch over Allis's shoulder.

"What is Marvelcomputer doing now Allis?" 'Dumm (or was it 'Dee? Both had almost identical green blothes.) asked.

Allis explained briefly about radio, and how she wanted to know if anyone had been hurt in the storm or was in need of anything because of it. When she finished talking, all the X's had moved into the "Condition Satisfactory" column except three.

She pressed the "Program" key again. "Make voice contact with. . ." she picked the first name on the list. . . "Hellene Eisen."

"Complete."

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"Hellene, this is Allis. We need to know if you're okay. Come on, Hellene, please answer."

She continued to speak through the tiny personal radio for thirty seconds or so, not knowing if Hellene was there, dead, miles away, alive or washing-her-hair-can't-come-to-the-phone-now-sorry. She was about to give up when Hellene answered in a barely audible whisper.

"Of course I'm okay. Now will you be quiet, you're going to spook them." She broke contact.

Allis noticed that Hellene's X had moved into "Condition Satisfactory." Marvel had been eavesdropping.

Something kissed the back of her neck. For a moment she thought that 'Dumm or 'Dee might have been smitten with passion for her. Then she turned around—and kissed her husband back.

"Stamm! I'm so glad you're here. I'm afraid you're going to have to make some pick-ups."

"I like that. I fly through rain, snow, heat and gloom of night just to get back to you and all you want to do is put me out to work."

She ignored him, attempting again to make contact with her two fallen sparrows. Stamm tried to exchange glances with 'Dee ("See what we men have to put up with?") but failed, the other not being equipped for it, so he stood and watched in silence.

After a couple of minutes, Allis gave him her attention again. "I can't make contact with either Tarpi or Rodder. As near as I can tell, Tarpi's last campsite was very near the center of the storm track, so you had better go check on him first. Rodder was sort of on the fringes, so he's—"

"Hey, lookit," Stamm interrupted. Marvel was putting on another light show but the spelling and grammar were not up to her usual standards. It was Tarpi, using his remote display terminal to message them. "Calpermine!" Stamm hooted. "Some people never learn."

"Okay, you'd better pick him up first, then hunt around and see if you can find Rodder. He probably hasn't moved too far from where you dropped him."

"Shall I take Tarpi some calpermine or should we let him learn from experience?"

"You most certainly shall take him some. Sometimes. Stamm. . . ."

"Just kidding." He turned and started out. 'Dumm and 'Dee followed him.

"May 'Dumm and 'Dee come too Stamm?" one of them asked.

"Sorry, fellas. No room this time."

'Dumm and 'Dee were not equipped to look disappointed. They went back to watch Allis, who was telling Tarpi that a relief force was on the way.

III

Nothing remained of Tarpi's campsite except the tentsheet, one edge of which had been buried and held fast. Unable to find his radio, Tarpi was returning to the Chimp village to see if they had anything to treat the itching, burning brands around his thighs when he found his

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notetaper and remote display terminal, both atop the knoll where Hester had dropped them.

Hester had joined him shortly after he had called for help, and it was there that Stamm found them, Tarpi scratching and cursing, Hester watching impassively. As Stamm set the flitter down, Tarpi ran to the landing site and when Stamm popped the dome, Tarpi was almost standing in his lap.

"Give me the calpermine."

"Patience, Tarpi. Now let me see, calpermine, calpermine. I know I put it here somewhere."

"Goddammit, Stamm, give it here."

"Language, son. There's a lady present." He indicated Hester.

"You've got just one second. . . ." Stamm handed over the tube. Tarpi sat on the rain-matted ground and began to smear the ointment on the affected areas.

"What is that Tarpi?" Hester wanted to know.

"I don't know." He was too busy, too angry, to be bothered.

"It's called 'calpermine,' " Stamm supplied. "It's supposed to keep Tarpi from itching so much."

Hester digested the statement. Then she announced: "I am called 'Hester.' "

"Pleased to meet you, Hester. My name's Stamm."

"Yes."

Tarpi stood and pulled his pants up. "If the amenities are satisfied, can we get out of here now?"

"Hop in." Stamm indicated the empty cabin.

"C'mon, Hester." Tarpi flopped into one of the seats.

"Won't you join us, Hester?" Stamm asked, his tone mildly rebuking to Tarpi.

Hester joined them without asking where they were going, Stamm noticed. They were like that—curious about everything and willing to try anything, with no thought for possible danger. They reminded him of something he had never quite been able to put his finger on—children were the closest, except that there was nothing childlike about them.

They rose straight up for a few hundred feet and headed almost due south. The sky was clear and from that height there was no sign of the tornadoes' passage.

"Hey, where are we going, Stamm? Camp's over that way." Tarpi gestured toward the left. "Isn't it?"

"Got to check on Rodder first. Allis couldn't make contact with him."

"Hell, he's probably just not communicating with anyone below the rank of God again. And even He'd have to let it ring twice and call back."

"And like as not, Rodder would get huffy and hang up on Him anyway," Stamm agreed. "You sound like the calpermine must be helping."

"Some. It's down to merely excruciating . . . hey, ruggers!"

Tarpi pointed down to the prairie. A thin, meandering trail of yellowish-green marred the distant perfection. At the near end was what looked to be a fifty-foot blob of furiously boiling, furry oatmeal. There were probably several hundred ruggers in the scrum, each intent on clawing, scratching and

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elbowing (figuratively) its way to the leading edge where the grazing was.

Almost brainless, they were so gregarious that a single one removed from the scrum would sit motionless in acute depression until it died, and so crotchety that the only thing they liked better than fighting each other was fighting the gryphons that eked out a living by preying on them.

Tarpi had once seen a gryphon try to snatch a young rugger. It was as though the predator had been instantly enveloped in a corrosive blanket; nothing was left behind but beak and bones. Ruggers were herbivorous—but not fanatic about it.

"I wonder if that's the same scrum I tagged a while back." Tarpi reached around for. . . . "Damn, I left the remote terminal back there."

"Okay, we'll pick it up on the return."

"See the ruggers, Hester." Tarpi was mellowing now that the calpermine was starting to take effect. He pointed down at them for Hester's benefit. She leaned to look along his arm.

"No but there are people down there."

"Huh? Who?"

"She's right," Stamm said. "See? There, just this side of that little rise with the two patches of trees and the little pond at the base. Their coloring makes them blend in."

"Oh, *Chimps*. I thought maybe somebody had moved his camp over here. Yes, I see them now."

A file of perhaps a dozen Chimps, most of them carrying bundles, was heading in the direction from which the flitter had come.

"Looks like free enterprise in action," commented Stamm.

"They bring help for the tornado," said Hester.

"You're very public-spirited people."

"I do not understand."

"To bring help for the tornado victims? There were victims, Tarpi?" Stamm asked.

"I guess so, but I don't think anything serious. I'm not sure."

"Two people were killed but no one was hurt," Hester said.

"Philosophical, isn't she?" Stamm remarked. "Maybe we ought to check on them later."

"Maybe."

IV

They found Rodder's camp in a grove of roundheels trees, not far from where Stamm had left him days before. A gentle breeze stirred the balls of leaves at the treetops, causing them to nod benignly over the limber trunks. In a slightly stiffer gale they would bend almost flat against the ground. A few buttress trees grew here and there as well, but they were mostly young and had not yet driven out the scrub growth.

The camp was laid out as neatly as a picture in a field manual, lacking only a camper. The three wandered through it, avoiding puddles, not touching anything, the two humans kicking at the leaves underfoot.

"Nobody to home," Stamm said.

"Looks as if," Tarpi agreed. He

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put his head into the tent, then went all the way in. His voice came out slightly muffled. "His personal radio doesn't seem to be here, so he must have it with him . . . hey, this is funny." He emerged with a bug-eyed object in one hand. "How many of these cameras did the film people have, anyway?"

"One apiece, as you ought to remember from their screaming about it. Wonder why he doesn't have it with him."

"Yeah . . . maybe he's out taking a crap or something." Tarpi tossed the camera back into the tent.

"Hey, careful with that!"

"No problem, they're practically indestructible. . . ." He took another slow look around. "Well, nuts, Stamm, all the storm did here was to drop a couple of centimeters of rain and knock down a few leaves, and that certainly wouldn't do Rodder any harm. Let's get out of here."

"Might as well, I guess. He'll show up when he damn well pleases." Stamm turned and started back toward the flitter.

"Is that Rodder?" Hester wanted to know. She pointed to a small, dense plot of head-high roundheels clamoring around the base of a dead twenty-foot buttress. The two men stopped and exchanged glances.

"That's Rodder," Stamm confirmed when they had thrashed their way into the undergrowth. The body lay on its back, one foot in an unused slit latrine, a branch from the dead buttress lying at a rakish angle across the forehead. Stamm knelt, felt the wrist briefly, then stood again.

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"He's dead."

Tarpi was astounded: He had never seen a dead person before. He bent and lifted a hand. He was amazed at how limp it was, with absolutely no muscle tone. And cold . . . and heavy . . . a clammy, useless *thing* that had once been somebody's right arm.

Stamm had been examining the angular growth of the dead buttress over their heads.

"It must have been a hell of a freak accident. The one loose branch on the whole tree, and he's standing under it the one instant when it decides to fall. The storm must have jostled it just enough that it was barely balanced, and afterward, when Rodder came out here to the latrine—surprise! Well, let's get him back and chuck him in the hospital. Maybe this'll cut him down to size a little."

"I think it's too late for that, Stamm. He's already cold. He's been dead for a couple of days at least."

"Goddam. You mean we're going to have to pay off the bond on *Rodder*?" His tone implied that that was like being fined for stepping on a cockroach. "That will almost break the expedition. We'll never be able to show a profit if we have to pay off on that."

Tarpi rolled the buttress branch off of Rodder's forehead; the struts were badly decayed and lighter than they looked.

"I'm afraid it's worse than that, Stamm. Look at the marks on his forehead. There's no way that branch could have fallen on him four separate times. I think he must have been murdered."

V

Allis looked in at Rodder's body, an undignified sprawl across the back seats of the flitter. She turned away, white-faced.

"Poor Rodder," she said. Stamm snorted, winning himself an angry look. "Will you turn his head please, Tarpi, so I can see the wounds."

Tarpi leaned in and tilted the head. Allis made a brief inspection, smoothing the hair away from the forehead. "You're right. Bludgeoned to death, several days ago." She thought for a moment. "Where are Sodom and Gomorrah?"

"His Chimps? I don't know. Stamm, did you—"

"No. They weren't around the camp. They could be anywhere by now."

Hester spoke up from behind Allis, causing her to jump. "Sodom and Gomorrah are in a town near where Rodder was it is their home."

Allis moved a few feet away. "Thank you."

"Yes."

"Her name is 'Hester,' honey," Stamm said. "Hester, this is 'Allis.' "

"Yes."

Allis ignored her. "Stamm, you'd better go see if you can find Sodom and Gomorrah and bring them back here. And I think Tarpi should accompany you."

"And Hester too."

"Certainly . . . you'll want to take Rodder inside before you leave, of course. No, wait, don't

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take him inside, just dump him on the ground by the entrance."

"You mean just lay him out there?"

"No, just dump him, all in a heap. . . . Don't leave before I get back." She vanished into the main tent.

Removing the body from the flitter was even tougher than getting it in. Finally Stamm had to stand in the back seat and heave it over the edge onto the ground. Then the two men carried it over and, as instructed, dumped it near the main entrance. They stood looking at it.

"Shall I maybe straighten him out just a little?" Tarpi asked.

"No, you shan't." Allis emerged from the tent, herding 'Dumm and 'Dee before her. "Leave him as he is. You two, go on, scat!" She made shooing motions at the two Chimps, who moved a few feet away to join Hester. "Here, Stamm." She handed him a pistol.

"What's that supposed to be for?" Tarpi asked.

"Ever hear of an unarmed cop?" Stamm asked in return.

"Cop! Somehow I can't visualize you bringing in two unarmed Chimps at gunpoint. Or needing to. Not to mention the fact that if you get hit with a kidnapping charge, the fine will make Rodder's bond look like peanuts."

"Oh, Stamm. The bond! I'd forgotten all about it," Allis exclaimed.

"I think it will work out okay, hon. The publicity will probably double sales of the film."

"I certainly hope so. Otherwise we'll wind up in the red for sure. Well, you two had best get started, and I have a lot to do too." She turned and vanished into the tent.

"You don't really think a Chimp did this, do you, Stamm?" Tarpi asked when they were airborne.

"They're the only obvious suspects. Sodom and Gomorrah in particular. The nearest humans were ten or fifteen klicks away, and even as much as most of us disliked Rodder, I can't conceive of anyone actually doing this to him. And he certainly didn't do it to himself."

"But the Chimps have always acted so tame, not been aggressive at all. Hell, I don't think they even eat meat any more."

"Ever look at their teeth?"

"Sure, that's just the point. They obviously evolved to be omniverous creatures, but they're vegetarians now. You don't eat other animals, do you, Hester?"

"No it would hurt too much."

"See, a Chimp couldn't have done it; they have ethics."

"So have I, but I wouldn't trust myself behind my own back with anything sharp, let alone Rodder's."

"Yes, but you had an ax to grind. Most of us did. But tell me, Stamm, why would a Chimp *want* to kill Rodder? Money, vengeance for stealing its woman, what?"

"I ceased to speculate on the motives of humans long before you were born, Tarpi. With ET's I never started. But let me tell you a story: When I was a young starman apprentice on my very first cruise, we landed on a nice, pastoral planet, almost as nice as this one. Deneb IV, you may know it. Anyway, the natives—sort of tall, fuzzy

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flitterbicks—came out and made offerings to the great silver thing from the sky, sang hosannas to us, the whole bit. Looked friendly as could be. Well, there wasn't a man or woman aboard that ship who wasn't dying to run through fields of fresh clover, or the local equivalent, so the captain suppressed his better judgment and turned us loose. A couple of days went by, nothing much happened. The locals loved having the gods hobnob with them, we all had a terrific time. Then the purser showed up hanging from a tree by a stake driven through his head—in one ear and out the other. And do you know why?"

"Spitting on the slidewalk?"

"Worse. He had failed to urinate in a public place. Sneaked off behind a tree and offended it. So if you can prove to me that Rodder positively did not do the moral equivalent of private urination, then I might believe you."

"Okay, so it's a lousy argument. But I still have trouble believing a Chimp did it."

"Then who did?"

VI

"It was a man," said Sodom.

They had landed as before at Rodder's campsite, then followed Hester through the brush about a kilometer to a tiny Chimp village of only three houses and a couple of outbuildings. They were all built along the same pattern—low, flat teepees, each radiating outward from a central tree, the largest of which was a buttress, the rest being fairly old roundheels.

The place looked to Tarpi like the Chimp equivalent of a family farm. The first Chimp they approached, a fairly old male, had answered to "Gomorrah" and Stamm claimed to recognize him. "Sodom" was a barely mature male, apparently a relative of Gomorrah's. Neither had seemed unwilling to answer questions.

"You mean a Chimp, a person like yourself," Stamm corrected.

"No a man like you."

"Was it a man or a woman?" Tarpi asked.

"A man he had no hair."

Tarpi stroked the fashionable skullcap atop his crew cut. "That's hardly conclusive. A woman with her hair tucked up into one of these caps would look as though she had no hair either. But you're sure it was a human?"

"Yes."

"Who was he? What did he look like?" Stamm demanded.

"A strange man I had never seen before."

"What did he look like?" Stamm repeated.

Sodom paused. ". . . a strange man."

"What about you, Gomorrah? Did you see him too? What did he look like?"

"Yes a strange man."

"Ask if they would know him if they saw him again," Tarpi suggested.

Sodom had overheard him. "Yes."

"What happened? What did he do?"

"He came in from the prairie followed Rodder into the latrine and hit him with a piece of tree."

"That's all?" Stamm was in-

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credulous. "He just wanders in off the prairie and without saying a word, starts banging on Rodder! He doesn't say anything, Rodder doesn't say anything, you don't say anything?"

"Rodder said 'no don't' and screamed painfully while he died."

"That's *all*?"

But apparently it was. Further questioning elucidated little more detail. The killer had come from an unobserved direction and had left toward the north, where, as far as anyone knew, there were no human encampments. Rodder had apparently seen him just as he was being struck. The two Chimps had been some distance away and had not seen fit to interfere. They were vague as to when it had happened, saying only that it was on the day Stamm had dropped off the party.

The men withdrew for a whispered conversation.

"Sounds fishy to me," Stamm said. "That's just what you'd expect them to say if one of them had done it. Each one vouches for the other and both blame some mysterious human."

"You make them sound like green and yellow Machiavellis . . . but I don't see that we have much choice but to take them back and let them try to identify one of us."

"And get somebody held on murder charges on their say-so?"

"Well, yes. But if they each identify the same person, there's a good chance that person's the killer and we certainly don't want him running around loose, do we? And if they did it themselves, like as not they'll each pick somebody different and each of those will have been a hundred klicks away with two other people. And then we'll have some reasonable evidence against them, not just circumstance."

"Hell, a good lawyer would just claim they made a mistake."

"Yes, but with only a hundred and seventeen of us on the whole planet, it would be a lot harder to make that stand up. They would have seen every last possible suspect."

"Okay, let's see if they'll come with us."

They returned to the Chimps. "Sodom, Gomorrah, we'd appreciate it if you'd come back to our main camp and see if you can pick out the man who killed Rodder," Stamm told them.

"Why?"

Stamm was nonplussed. As well explain why it's light in the daytime. "Rodder is dead, murdered. We want to catch and punish the culprit."

"Why?"

"It is in accord with our customs," Tarpi said.

The two Chimps conferred and then appeared to consult Hester. None of the conversation was audible to the humans.

"We will come."

VII

When they radioed Allis the situation, she went into action, ordering all expedition members to drop what they were doing and prepare to report back to base camp as soon as Stamm could pick them up. Tarpi had the feeling that she had been wanting to re-assert her author-

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ity by calling a general meeting and welcomed the mammoth line-up as an excuse.

Not unnaturally, most of her invitations were declined without thanks, and were accepted only when she threatened to completely cut off computer services. Since Marvel performed almost all data storage, from recording movie pictures to taping field notes, the members had little choice but to attend, although they did not have to be nice about it.

But as they filtered in by ones and twos past Rodder's body—a sprawled and undignified heap where she had had Stamm and Tarpi leave it—their mood changed considerably and by midnight, when they were finally assembled in the circular common room, Allis faced a group that was at least not totally hostile. She used a chair to step up onto a table and instantly had their attention.

"Well, you've all seen what happened to Rodder. Of course the responsibility is entirely mine, and Stamm and I will pay quite heavily for my error. Better judgment indicated that going about in parties of less than three persons was unwise but the prima donnas among you convinced me that it was impossible for them to carry on 'their work' with other people jostling their elbows and trampling through their experiments. Needless to say, in the future no group smaller than three will be allowed away from the base."

There were unhappy murmers but obviously it was a necessary precaution. Even so, a small group of diehards argued her down from three to two in "special cases" before they let her continue.

"Very well." Tarpi noticed that she looked harried. "Now, as I'm sure the grapevine has informed you, the two Chimps who were accompanying Rodder—"

"You mean slaving for him," someone shouted from three o'clock, low.

"I meant what I said, Lessiline," Allis responded with some asperity. "If the Chimps choose to accompany us and occasionally help with minor chores for their own reasons, that's their business. But this expedition is in enough trouble without having unwarranted charges of slavery leveled, and I'll thank you to keep silent. Now, you're aware that Rodder's Chimps are, at the very least, witnesses to the crime, and quite possibly a good deal more. They claim to have seen a human kill Rodder and they say they can identify him."

The crowd murmured protest. Everyone had known the Chimps were in the camp but had assumed their presence was for purposes of lynching.

"So in a minute," she continued, "I'm going to have one of them brought in to see if he can pick out the alleged culprit."

They protested even louder at that. "What about our rights?" someone shouted from the back.

"I realize that technically this tramples on your rights, but I think this is the easiest way to settle the charges these two *intelligent, legally responsible beings* have made." The emphasis on the legal catchphrase was heavy. "I think the odds of each of them separately identify-

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ing not only the same person, but someone who could reasonably have committed the crime, and who lacks an alibi, are negligible. And that failure will give us prima facie evidence to hold them and later remove them from the planet for trial when the *Ariel* returns for us."

She nodded to Stamm, who fondled Marvel briefly. "We're recording now," she went on. "For the record, is there anyone here who objects to allowing the two Chimps named 'Sodom' and 'Gomorrah' to attempt this identification?"

She waited for a moment, surveying the crowd. When nobody responded, she nodded to Stamm again.

He left the room and returned shortly with Sodom in tow. There was a low rumble accompanied by a slight tension in the room. Sodom gazed around at the group, his vaguely anthropomorphic features, plus his black velvet sonar receptor, giving him the emotionless expression of an executioner. He followed Stamm, a pace behind and one to the side, in a slow tour of the crowd, passing through them like a breeze, causing them to straighten before him and relax after his passage. They finally returned to the start.

"Well?" said Allis.

"He is not here."

"But this is all the humans there are on the planet. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You still claim that you saw Rodder killed by a human, by one of us?"

"Yes."

"But that human is not in this room?"

"Yes."

"Could somebody have skipped out on us?" a small, stocky blonde girl asked. "You know, be hiding in the restroom or something?"

"Maybe you ought to have Marvel call the roll, hon," Stamm said.

So Marvel called the roll, twice, the second time with everyone walking past Sodom as his name was called.

By the time Allis got to "Abram Willks" again, most of the crowd was rumbling angrily. They had been gathered here against their wills and it was late at night, and in spite of the fact that no one liked him very much, Rodder *had* been murdered, and they thought they knew by whom. They were ready for a little blood.

"All right, he's had three chances. That ought to be enough to satisfy the record. I move we take him out and execute him." A tall, thin man near the wall was waving his hand over his head. There were shouts of "Second" from a half-dozen people around the room.

"I'm afraid you're under a misapprehension, Herm," Allis said. "This is not a stockholders' meeting of this corporation, it's a meeting of corporation employees. And as such, you're in no position to make motions of any sort."

"Now just a minute, Madame Chairman—"

"No, Herm, *not* 'Madame Chairman,'" Allis said sharply. "Right now I'm commander of this expedition, president of the corporation, the sole ruler with absolute authority. I'm willing to listen to any reasonable discussion but the final decisions are entirely mine. And

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immediate execution of this being is out of the question. Certainly it may be appropriate to hold him for trial aboard *Ariel* when she returns, but lynching him would be heinously immoral. It would merit not only fines but actual incarceration for us all. Or have you forgotten Epsilon Scorpio VI?" She looked out at them, her eyebrows raised in question. "All right, does anyone have any reasonable suggestion to offer?"

"Gomorrah," said Tarpi.

"Certainly, our other witness. Stamm, will you please bring him in?"

But Gomorrah's performance differed from Sodom's in no significant detail. Yes he was sure a human had killed Rodder. No the human was not here. Yes he was sure cross my heart ma'am honest to gods. Stamm led him out again.

It was all very unsatisfying; they had wanted a clear-cut solution, somebody to blame and punish so that they could get back to their work. Instead they had a story that was almost certainly a lie but impossible to verify. And, oh, God, what if it were true?

Their frustration turned on Allis. Why weren't we issued guns to protect ourselves from these little vermin? There was no apparent reason for it. Besides, one gun won't divide one hundred and seventeen ways. Why didn't you call *Ariel* to pick us up as soon as this happened? Impossible. Even if we could get a message to her, a starship's time is scheduled so far ahead and is so valuable that literally nothing can deflect it. Not even the lives of one hundred and sixteen people? You heard me. Had anybody thought to look at Rodder's last films? I mean, maybe they show— We're not fools. They show nothing, simply standard footage of ruggers and gryphons and whatnot.

Could it be true, you know, what the Chimps said about another strange human on the planet? Sure, Herm. Somebody probably popped up in his private space yacht for the express purpose of bludgeoning Rodder to death. Why didn't we think of that? Allis recognized that if she were tired enough to be sarcastic, nothing further was likely to be accomplished and so she maneuvered them into small conversational groups ("I want committee recommendations in the morning") and went to bed.

VIII

They buried Rodder the next day, Stamm reading the service. There was no eulogy. Sodom and Gomorrah were held pending the arrival of *Ariel*, although there was considerable minority argument for releasing them. And work resumed as before.

Or almost as before. For a while Chimps were banned from many camps as dangerous (or frightening) and their presence was unwelcome. But as time passed, their gentleness and eager curiosity let them diffuse once again into their old status. It was difficult to stay mad at them.

Allis enforced her "no-solo-parties" rule. Tarpi pleaded special circumstances and drew the small, stocky blonde girl as his partner. Her name was Io Gallar and she was one of the film crew making

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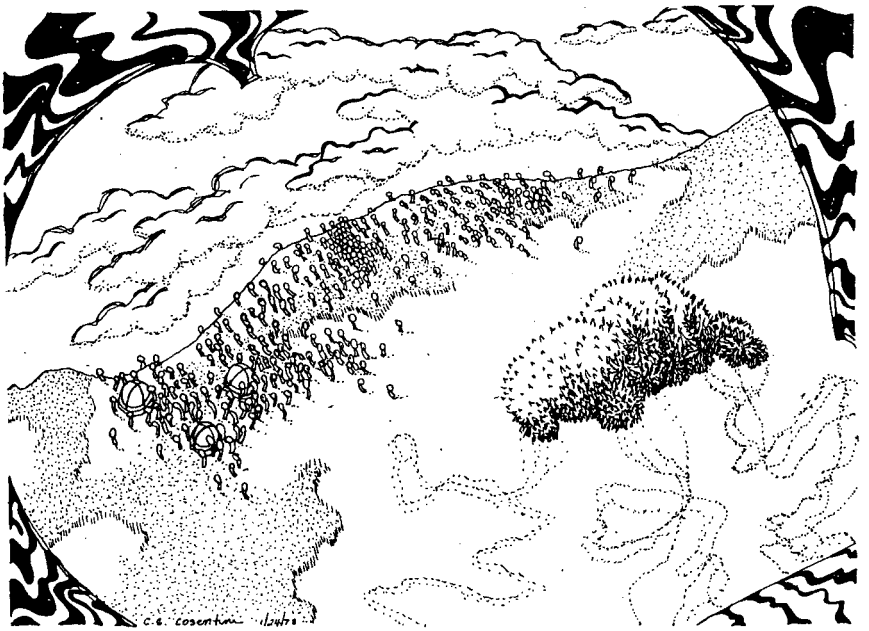

nature movies of the local wildlife, the profits of which were intended to defray the cost of the expedition. The usual aloofness between film crew and scientific personnel stood between them for the first week and they played it very crisp and businesslike. ("I'd appreciate it if you could stay away from the mound of shriekers down near the stream for a few days, Miss Gallar." "Certainly, Doctor Liddell.")

Then one day Tarpi started whistling every time he saw her, repeating the same tune each time. It was a day and a half before she gave in and acknowledged it.

"All right, I give up. What's the song?"

"Song? What song?" He was innocence itself.

"The song you've been whistling for the past two days and which I'm obviously supposed to recognize."

"Oh, this song?" He whistled a few bars of it.

"Yes, that song."

"An old Disney classic like that and you don't recognize it?" He shook his head pityingly. "Your education is sorely lacking." He broke into song: "Io, Io, its off to work we go. . . ." He got past three and a half bars before she hit him with a plastic plate—but not very hard.

After that the tension between them melted and before long they had moved all the equipment into one tent and all the personnel into the other. And field work became much more pleasant.

It was probably the reference to Disney that gave Io the idea she broached to Tarpi as they lay cuddled spoonwise one night after mak-

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ing love.

"That was really great, Tarpi."

"You're right." He parodied smug self-satisfaction.

"If we could only get it on film, we'd make a profit for sure, bond or no bond."

"Yeah . . . never get it past the Board of Prudes, though."

"Uh-huh . . . you know what a lot of the old-timers used to do?"

"No, what?"

"Well, they would sneak sex into their films. They'd get shots of bare-breasted native women, or animals mating, or being born, and would slip it past the Board as educational."

"Which it was. So?"

"But many people thought it was dirty too. And it boosted sales a lot."

"Okay, so go out and get some pictures of ruggers or Chimps-Doing-It."

"Yes, I thought of that already but ruggers are no good. Even if you could get two of them outside the scrum to do anything but merely sit there, they would just look like a couple of furry beach-balls nuzzling. Chimps would be perfect though, Tarpi, except for one thing."

Tarpi was not totally insensitive. "Your spontaneity is showing. Okay, what is the one thing?" he asked.

"Well, they have this law or taboo against public appearances, just like we have. But I finally talked Jeeves and Hester into it." Jeeves was to Io as Hester was to Tarpi. "There's a hitch though. I had to bid so high that their curiosity got the better of them."

"What did you offer them, Ambrose Bierce's current address?"

"No, they want to watch us first."

"God, you mean they've been hiding in the corner all this time!" He clutched at the top of the sleeping bag.

"No, stupid. But can we, Tarpi? I think it would add a lot to the film, and it wouldn't do us any harm. It might even be kind of fun."

"Let me think for a minute . . . okay, I guess so."

Io turned over and hugged him. "It's not like they were really people. And it might be really great at that. How do you want to play it? Screaming, tearing rape—or slick, sly seduction?"

"Well, that rape thing sounds sort of interesting but we'd better save that for later, I think. Where did you learn slick, sly seduction, anyway?"

"Never mind."

"If you can't show me any credentials, then I guess we'll just have to play it straight."

"Tomorrow night? 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly,' or however the saying goes."

"Not always," he replied. "But in this case I think that's best."

IX

The following night, it were done. Afterward Tarpi, still frisky, looked over at the two Chimps in the shadows and asked, "Well, Hester, how was it?" Io elbowed him in the ribs.

"It was interesting."

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"Interesting how?" he pursued. "It's always a good idea to get different points of view," he whispered aside to Io.

"Sex makes you both look very strange for a time."

"Look strange how? . . . Ouch, stop that, you're giving me a bruise there."

Hester paused for a moment. "Very strange."

Tarpi leaned back and looked thoughtful. Io answered the Chimps' remaining questions and then sent them out. She looked over at Tarpi.

"If I get you a cigarette, will you lie there and blow smoke up at the ceiling pensively?"

He ignored her question. "Io, describe me."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

"Well, you're fairly good-looking, maybe six feet tall, sort of skinny, reddish-brown hair, brown eyes, and you have a sinister-looking scar on the bridge of your nose. Close enough?"

"From a description like that, someone could probably pick me out from the rest of the expedition, at least. Now how many of the characteristics you listed would a Chimp list?"

"Everything except hair and eye color, probably."

"No, think about it. The Chimps have no standard with which to decide whether I'm as handsome as I actually am or as ugly as a dried prune. There's nobody on the expedition who's grossly fat or thin—"

"I love you for that."

"—or thin, so the Chimps have no standard for comparison there either. And as for my sabre scar—"

"I still say it was probably a broken beer sphere."

"—I don't think they even see it. Look, they all broadcast their sonar sound on a frequency of about thirty thousand cycles, which gives a wavelength of, um, about a centimeter or so. They just plain can't see anything much smaller than that. No sabre scar. Hell, they're probably hard-pressed to make out any features at all. The most they could 'see' of me would be 'a man, six feet tall.' And you got that wrong anyway, I'm only five-ten."

"I know, I was trying to boost your ego."

"Liar. But that's why their towns and their art seem so crummy to us. Once they have all the irregularities down to less than a centimeter or so, everything 'looks' okay to them despite the fact that it still looks unfinished to us. But anyway, the point is, why did Hester say sex made us look 'strange?' "

Io suggested a possiblity.

"That's ignoble. Besides, she said both of us."

"Yes, and she could have described it anyway. But I see what you mean. If all they can resolve of us is sort of human-shaped blurs, we must look pretty much the same to them all the time. But, Tarpi, if that's true, how can they tell themselves apart? Or us apart, for that matter? I've never had one call me by the wrong name."

"I know what you mean. And you're right. Since they can't see each other's green blotches, they ought to look pretty much alike to each other . . . no, wait. Sonar. They can probably tell themselves

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apart by voice, and us too, for that matter.''

''No good,'' Io said. ''They all use the same frequency—thirty-six thousand, two hundred forty-three point six cycles. I remember Herm's telling me about it and laughing. It's an organic crystal resonance or something. When they talk to us, we hear a subharmonic.''

''But that wouldn't prevent them from telling *us* apart by voice,'' Tarpi countered.

''And it wouldn't make us look 'strange' during sex. Voiceprints are supposed to be as constant as fingerprints.''

''You know, 'very strange' is also how Sodom described Rodder's murderer,'' Tarpi mused.

''That's not too surprising; they don't have many descriptors to work with. Either we look like we usually do or we look 'very strange.' ''

''But, Io, what do lovers and murderers have in common that make them both look 'very strange' to a Chimp? Seriously.''

She shrugged. ''I don't know. They both might be excited or scared in some circumstances but a Chimp certainly couldn't see that. Or maybe. . . .''

Tarpi sat up. ''Couldn't they?''

''Well, no. I thought we had decided they couldn't make out anything as fine as facial expressions.''

''Listen . . . a few weeks ago, just before we found Rodder's body, we flew over a scrum of ruggers, Hester, Stamm and I. We were almost on top of them, just a few hundred meters away, but Hester couldn't see them.''

''Of course not. The flitter dome doesn't transmit sound, only light.''

''Exactly. But she *could* see a group of Chimps better than two klicks away.''

''That's a pretty good trick.''

''If she were sonaring them, it would be. But what if she were seeing them mentally, with empathy or telepathy or something like that?''

''That's sort of far-fetched, even coming from you.''

''Yes, but it's beautiful, it explains everything,'' he said excitedly. ''She can't sense the ruggers' presence because they have no more brains than a retarded cabbage, but the Chimps' presence would show up like ants on a plate. And a person in an orgasm or a killing rage would look grossly different—mentally, that is—than the usual human. They would both look 'very strange.' And they are.''

''Maybe so . . . and you know how every Chimp you meet always seems to know your name. That could be telepathy too.''

''I always thought we were being supersonically introduced, but you could be right. Although I don't think it can really be telepathy. Maybe it's more like empathy. If they were well-developed telepaths, they wouldn't need a language, and they certainly have one.''

''They wouldn't be very curious either. They'd be able to pick whatever they wanted straight out of your minds.''

''Uh-huh, except maybe it doesn't work very well with humans. Different wavelength or something. I bet that's why they don't eat meat any more too. Sirloin steak wouldn't be so attractive if

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you had to suffer the death agony of the steer before you ate it. They don't have ethics, they're just chicken."

"A Chimp couldn't have killed Rodder then, either: I mean if they really are empathetic."

"Of course it's true, it has to be."

"Well, with the weight of your assertion, plus some wild speculation to back it up, I'm sure you'll have no trouble in finding converts."

"Okay, doubting Io, I'll prove it to you." He sat up again and shouted into the tent flap: "Hester, hey, Hester, come here a minute." He turned to Io. "Sit up a second, will you darling."

Jeeves put his head through the tent opening. "Hester is not here Tarpi."

"That's okay, Jeeves. Come in here for a minute. I want you to look at something."

He slapped Io's face stingingly.

"Why, you goddam dirty . . . oh . . . I see. Very clever, you louse." Io rubbed the red handprint on her cheek, still three-quarters mad.

"Darling, I humbly and abjectly beg your forgiveness. You don't know how sorry I am I had to do that."

"Okay, just don't make a habit of it. And don't forget that I owe you one—a big one. Jeeves, did I look different to you just then when Tarpi slapped me?"

"Yes Io."

"Different that I usually do?"

"Yes."

Io leaned back. "Well, that's indicative at least."

"Indicative, hell," Tarpi said. "Jeeves, how long a time did Io look different?"

"A very short time Tarpi."

"Just immediately after I slapped her?"

"Yes."

"How did she look then?"

Jeeves paused. "Very strange."

"Did she look the same as when she looked strange during sex?"

"No."

"How was it different?"

Jeeves paused for a long time. "I do not know words for it Tarpi."

"Okay, Jeeves, you can leave now." He leaned back beside Io and looked at her. "You see?"

"Well, it seems likely . . . I wonder why they never mentioned it."

"Did we ever think to tell them that they all look alike to us except for the patterns of green on their little yellow bodies? It would have been about as meaningful as their telling us that your psyche gets all mimsy when you're mad. Besides, it was so obvious that probably none of them ever thought of it."

"I wonder what we really look like to them," Io mused. "If you don't use sight but sonar and empathy, or whatever it is, I mean."

"Probably mimsy, with patches of grell, shading to demi-grell, depending on mood. Which is to say that we'll never know."

"Depending on / mood? Oh, Tarpi—Sodom and Gomorrah! They may have been telling the truth."

"Well, sure. The first time they saw the murderer he was mad enough or frightened enough to kill. The next time he was probably in a rational state. He 'looked' com-

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pletely different to them."

"But that means that one of us really *did* kill Rodder. It wasn't just a story the Chimps made up."

"You didn't think Sodom or Gomorrah did it, did you?"

"I guess I did, kind of. I mean, it was better than . . . who do you think did it?"

"I don't know. But maybe if we ask in the right way, we can get Sodom and Gomorrah to tell us."

X

The flitter was full. Allis and Stamm occupied the two front seats; Tarpi and Io were in the back, Sodom and Gomorrah on their laps. Crouched in the small space in the rear was Lessiline. Allis had tried to persuade Stamm to rig the cargo net underneath for the two Chimps to ride in but he had declined—unless Allis wanted to ride there too. She did not.

They flew at low altitude toward a scarlet sunset, the humans aboard concentrating their attention on the scribble of yellowish-green rugger trails that tangled the prairie below.

"Hurry it up, will you, Stamm," said Lessiline. "I'm about to freeze in an obscene position back here."

"Should be just a couple more minutes, Less. In that little grove just ahead."

The "little grove" was dense with roundheels, thrashing and writhing wildly in a stiff breeze. Three small hemispherical orange tents were occasionally visible through gaps in the trees, their dayglo color catching the eye like the blink of a lighthouse. The flitter made a low pass over the scrum of ruggers, flushing a brace of humans as it did so, and landed at the edge of the grove near the camp.

Humans and Chimps piled out and then watched with amusement as Lessiline ostentatiously unstiffened each joint and creakily clambered down. She seemed to have aged fifty years during the eight-minute flight.

One of the humans they had flushed angrily pounded up to them. "What the hell do you damn fools think you're doing?"

"Now hold it a minute, Ard—" Stamm began.

" 'Hold it' nothing. We work all day trying to get that scrum quiescent and then just when we've finally got 'em settled down, *zoom!* along comes Tom Swift and His Flying Noisemaker. Thanks a lot. Thanks a hell of a lot."

"C'mon, Ard, you can't even hear that thing fifty meters away," Stamm went to the flitter's defense.

"Tell it to the ruggers."

"Okay, I'm sorry, I apologize. All right?"

"Hell of a lot of good that does." Ard was not going to be mollified.

"Standing here arguing about it doesn't do much good either, does it?" Allis asked impatiently. "Ard, we need to see Janos. Where is he?"

"What for?"

"Never mind what for," she said evenly. "Just show us where he is, please."

Ard looked half angry, half curious. "Through there." He pointed toward the edge of the grove. "Go a few hundred meters through the trees and you'll come out into a big

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patch of cottonweed. He's out in the middle of it with a nest of mousies."

"Show us, will you please?"

"Can't. Have to help Adda with the ruggers." He was getting even with them. "But just keep going straight ahead. You can't miss it." He turned away and then looked back over his shoulder. "And when you leave, take off over the grove, will you? Not over the ruggers." He hurried off.

The slow sunset filled the grove with long shadows and red light, and the bobbing treetops held their peripheral vision, pestering them with warnings of unnamed horrors leaping on them from the darkness. They trudged along in single file, silent except for the moment when a treetop swept too close to Io. She jumped and then cursed herself too loudly. ("Take it easy, you fool. That tree hasn't bitten anyone in weeks.")

It seemed farther than "a few hundred meters" but eventually the trees thinned and they reached the patch of cottonweed. It was in full bloom, a total undercast stained bloody red by the last bite of the setting sun.

Janos was a few dozen meters away, wading slowly toward them, submerged almost up to his hips in the dense brush. The sun illuminated his left side redly; his right side was deeply shadowed. As he came out of the cottonweed in front of them, the sun slipped below the horizon, the shadows vanished and the long, dim twilight began.

Janos dumped his load of equipment at their feet. He was a small man, about fifty years old, in good condition. His manner was a shade too hearty. "Well, well. Stamm. Allis. Tarpi. Less. Io, isn't it?" He nodded at each in turn; his glance slid over the two Chimps. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"We'd like to talk to you about Rodder," Allis said.

"Rodder? Well, all right, if you want. Although I must say, I've always found it better to heed the Biblical injunction to let the dead past bury its dead. Let's walk back to camp while we talk, shall we?"

He hefted his load and started off into the dimness. Allis walked beside him.

"That's Longfellow," Tarpi suddenly said. "'Let the dead past bury its dead' isn't Biblical, it's from Longellow."

"Quite so," said Janos. "Now then, Allis, you wanted to talk about Rodder. Am I correct an assuming that those two (a thumb over the shoulder indicated Sodom and Gomorrah) are the culprits responsible for his death?"

Allis ignored his question. "How did you feel about Rodder, Janos?"

"Much the same as everyone else, I think. With years of study at the foot of a saint, Rodder could possibly have achieved the moral standards of a swine."

"And how did you feel when he died?"

"Well, I—"

"Hon, this isn't getting us anywhere," Stamm interrupted. "Get to the point."

"Perhaps that would be just as well, Allis," Janos agreed. "Just what *is* the point of all this?"

"All right, Janos." She took a breath. "Before he was transported

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to his new field site on the day he was killed, Rodder had been working out of base camp for a while. Stamm and I put our heads together, and our recollections—plus a lot of help from various records stored in Marvel—indicate that Rodder was at base for six days and that during that time twenty-one other expedition members were also there for varying periods."

"And I was one of the twenty-one. So were you. So was Stamm. So what?"

She ignored him. "Only those twenty-one people could have known where Rodder was going to set up his new camp. We had Marvel examine the data stored by each of them on the day Rodder was killed, November ninth. Of the twenty-one sixteen showed typical input during the day, including notetapes. The voiceprints are verifiable, of course. Of the remaining five, three showed no input at all for the day. They were Vicktor and his cohorts, taking the day off at Ramshorn Lake. Wardal didn't show any input either but she *had* filmed some scenes the previous day. The terrain is quite identifiable; it's her site, all right—ninety-two klicks from where Rodder was killed."

"That makes twenty, I believe. I, presumably, am the twenty-first," Janos said.

"Yes. Your records for the day show only a small segment of very bad film of a shrieker mound. The light was almost gone. Portions are even a little out of focus. It was eleven klicks from your camp to Rodder's, an easy three-hour hike in most circumstances, but you must have misgauged it, what with having to swing around to come and go from a different direction. It must have been frightening—hurrying, hurrying, racing the sun, trying to get back in time to take the film that would establish your alibi. And you just didn't quite make it."

"Allis, I would resent that accusation more than I can say if I didn't feel so very sorry for you. It's obvious that you've let your sympathy for those two Chimps warp your judgment so severely that you'll contrive a circumstantial case against one of your own people in order to free them." He shook his head sadly.

"I'm afraid it's a good deal more than circumstance, Janos. There are two witnesses against you."

"Indeed!" He stopped walking. "And who would they be?"

"Sodom and Gomorrah."

"Excellent, excellent. Very good choices. The two murderers have now, under no doubt expert coaching, searched their memories and discovered that despite failing to recognize me the first three times they saw me, I am nonetheless the man they saw kill Rodder." He turned to confront the Chimps. "Is that right? Do you now claim that you saw me kill Rodder?"

"No Janos," Sodom said.

"No," Gomorrah echoed.

"No?" He was taken aback. "What is this, Allis? Those two don't accuse me."

"I should have explained. Tarpi has discovered that the Chimps are highly sensitive to the emotional states of other beings and that in fact they identify us largely on, uh, how our minds 'look' to them.

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When they saw you kill Rodder, you were in the grip of some very strong emotion. You had to be, to commit murder. Apparently the other times they saw you, when they tried to identify the murderer back at base, you were calmer and so you looked different to them. You're a very cool man, Janos. Usually."

"Be serious, Allis. I'd as lief believe the entrails of a chicken as that story."

"We've tested them in several ways. Their ability is quite real. Quite repeatable, too, with a given person, although different people appear to change differently for the same emotion. Really very interesting. . . . But what we would like you to do is to allow Lessiline, here, to regress you under hypnosis to the day Rodder was killed. In that way your mental state will duplicate your mental state when Sodom and Gomorrah saw you kill Rodder, and they'll be able to identify you. In addition—"

"That's quite out of the question, Allis."

"I was afraid it probably would be. . . . Go!"

Tarpi and Stamm grabbed for Janos's arms. Tarpi got a firm grip but Janos saw Stamm coming, grabbed the front of his tunic as he ran forward and pulled him along into the underbrush. Then he went for Tarpi's eyes with his free hand.

But he was outnumbered. Io grabbed his hand just as Allis kicked the backs of his knees, causing him to crumple to the ground. Tarpi and Io fell on him and then Lessiline—who had been dancing around looking for an opening—leaned in and injected him in the neck. Janos stopped struggling as though he had been pole-axed.

"Damn! Is it supposed to do that?" Tarpi asked as he scrambled to his feet.

"It's usual," said Lessiline. "He'll be a little livelier in a minute or two."

"Stamm, dear, you were out of position," Allis said as her husband rejoined them.

"Yes, I know," he said shortly, looking down at Janos lying on the ground.

"It should be any second now," Lessiline said.

Janos screamed—a piercing, horrifying, animal sound.

"There you go. Classic reaction."

"How can you sound so self-satisfied, Less?" Io asked.

Janos began to writhe, alternately raging loudly and then gibbering softly to himself.

"Hush, children," Allis ordered. She turned to Sodom and Gomorrah and stated formally: "Sodom, Gomorrah, I ask you now in the presence of these witnesses if the man you saw kill Rodder is here."

"Yes Allis the man on the ground," said Sodom.

"Yes," said Gomorrah.

"Which one, Gomorrah?" Allis pursued.

"The one on the ground."

"You see," said Stamm. "I told you it had to be anger. Janos was never afraid of anything in his life."

"Okay," Allis said impatiently. "Is everyone clear now on whom the Chimps have identified and what they identify him as having

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done? Does anyone want to ask any questions?"

No one did. They stood in silence for several minutes, watching Janos rage, each thinking his own thoughts. Then they were suddenly distracted by thrashing noises and a flickering light in the grove behind them. It was Ard, waving a flashlight. The darkness had crept up on them and the light was welcome.

"What the hell are you idiots up to now? What's all the screaming about? Jesus Christ! What happened to *him*?"

"Minimal dose of Schillizide," Lessiline said. "He'll come out of it in a few minutes."

"Schillizide? What the hell's that?"

"A psychotomimetic." She saw that he looked blank. "A drug. It produces a condition indistinguishable from intense, psychotic rage."

"Why did he take that?"

"He didn't," Allis said. "We gave it to him."

"Huh?"

"Help us carry him back and I'll explain."

XI

Janos decided to open his eyes. He lay on his back, the orange hemisphere of the tent over his head softly illuminated by a light beyond his range of vision. Lessiline looked down at him.

"About time you woke up. You were making me look bad." Her tone was carefully neutral.

"I've been conscious for some time . . . where is everyone else?" He rolled suddenly to his feet, crouching under the low dome.

Lessiline backed up warily. "Outside."

He went through the tent flap. It was dark now, a canopy of stars overhead. People were circled around a low fire, the Chimps hovered farther back in the shadows. A hundred meters beyond, light flashed occasionally as Adda went about her arcane duty with the ruggers.

Allis looked up at him. "Sodom and Gomorrah identified you, Janos, while you were unconscious."

"I know. I heard most of what you told Ard. It would be easy for me to fight the charge, Allis. A judge would never allow a defendant to be drugged like that and your Chimps could never identify me in court. And your testimony would be merely hearsay."

"Are you going to fight, Janos?" Allis asked.

He sagged. "No . . . it would be easiest for me to resist, every instinct tells me to . . . but it would be futile." He sat and stared into the fire. "I've been doomed ever since you became convinced that those two were telling the truth. Forgetting about his Chimps—that was incredibly stupid of me. In retrospect, I see that I planned the whole adventure rather badly. Now that you've had confirmation of your conclusions, you'll have little trouble compiling other evidence against me. I could fight if I wished, drag myself and the whole expedition through the muck of a public trial . . . but I won't."

"Do you want to tell us why you did it?" Allis asked gently.

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"No, I don't. It's an ugly story and reflects no credit on me. But I suppose I must say something. . . . Suffice it to say that while Rodder and I were both at base camp, he was responsible for my becoming quite permanently addicted to a rather unpleasant compound found in an infusion of ohhell weed. It results in a loss of inhibition and control which I find intolerable. I could not, I was unable, to let him go unpunished. The rest is as you have surmised, save that I did not misgauge the time required for the journey to his camp; I simply lost my way and wandered for some hours on the prairie. . . . Well!"

He straightened briskly and looked around at the group, staring each in the eyes for a brief instant. "I don't suppose one of you has a gentlemanly pistol? I thought not. Ah, well. But what a gesture."

He rose and started out into the darkness. Stamm stood up and moved to block his path.

"Let him go, Stamm," Allis said. Her voice sounded tired.

"But, hon—"

"Let him go."

Stamm moved aside. Janos walked out into the darkness, his head erect, his step measured. When he reached the edge of the scrum of ruggers, he paused for a brief moment, then took three running steps and dived headfirst into them. They started to boil vigorously.

Sodom and Gomorrah screamed —a long, mournful note. The humans rose and started toward the flitter. What was happening in the scrum behind them, they did not want to see. ★

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GALAXY BOOKSHELF

Paul Walker

Seademons by Laurence Yep. Harper and Row, 1977. 185pp. $8.95.
New Voices in Science Fiction edited by George R.R. Martin. Macmillian, 1977. 268pp. $8.95.
Time Storm by Gordon R. Dickson. St. Martin's Press, 1977. $10.00.

* * *

Pierce: Sorry to bother you at this hour, Paul, but you left out the author and title of your last review.
Walker: *Seademons*.
Pierce: "See. . . Demons." Right. And the author?
Walker: Yep.
Pierce: "Yup. . ."
Walker: Yep.
Pierce: Right. And the first name?
Walker: Laurence.
Pierce: "Lawrence. . .Yup."
Walker: *Yep*.
Pierce: Right. Watch it, next time, okay. You know I can't abide carelessness.

I LIKED LAURENCE Yep's *Seademons* very much. What did I like most about it? Listen:

> At first he had hoped that going to the rectory [school] would help her to adjust, but after the trouble with Radog the Anglic knew he would have to

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try to "humanize" her—as he called it—by himself.

For their own sake, the Anglic took Maeve more and more into the wild. They wandered through the forests and the mountains far to the east along the northern seas. He showed her everything that was strange and wonderful and beautiful about Fancyfree [their planet] in the hope that she would come to love her new world. He showed her the star trees, and the paradise birds with wings like rainbows and voices like angels, and the giant spider webs that the winds sang through. Hunters would cross their path occasionally and bring back reports that both the Anglic and his creature looked well.

Or:

"It was already growing dark in the Wailing Mountains, and the sharp-pointed rocks made strange, teeth-like shadows which grew on either side as if jaws were closing about our shadows. There was a strange, lifeless silence here where nothing grew, though sometimes we would hear the high, lonely keening wind that gave the mountains their name. It was as if we had stumbled over the edge of the world into some strange limbo of the dead, for the Eyes in the wintertime were nothing like in the spring."

There is no greater delight for a reviewer than to pick up a new book by a new writer and to find that he or she is a bright new talent. Not someone who is simply "promising," whose technical clumsiness one feels obliged to apologize for in the hopes of better things to come, but someone who emerges in the top ranks of storytellers with his or her first book. Such a writer is Laurence Yep.

He was born in San Francisco and got his doctorate in literature from the State University of New York at Buffalo. He published his first story "The Selchey Kids," in *If*, and it was selected as one of the best of the year 1969. Since then he has written three children's books, *Sweetwater*, *Child of the Owl*, and *Dragonwings*, the last of which was a Newberry Honor Book. If I had the time, I would read them immediately, for I suspect Yep's juveniles would appeal as much to fantasy-reading adults as to kids.

Certainly, *Seademons* is a must.

I hesitate to tell the story because the pleasure of the book is not the story, but the telling, and just to recount the events will distort the truth of the narrative quality of it.

It takes place on the primitive world of Fancyfree where we find a colony of humans who have fled a super-race called the "Fair Folk" to find freedom on a world where they will not be second-class citizens.

Before they left, their leader, Da, had them set down all they could remember of their former lives, so they would not forget. Naturally, some things were lost in translation, as they call their original home "Tara" instead of "Terra," and their homes "dooms" instead of domes. Also, in leaving civilization, they have lost much of the

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technological know-how of the Fair Folk; and what they have left, diving suits and robots and a single great computer, will not last forever. Already they are slipping back into a more primitive lifestyle, becoming superstitious and warlike. Their leaders, then, are faced with a race against time to establish at least a pre-nuclear industrial society before the last of the gadgets breaks down.

Now, I know this sounds familiar, but it is really just background material covered in a few pages. The story begins from there.

The heroine (in every sense of the word) is Ciaran, daughter of the Lord of the Holding. She and her half-brother, heir to the Lord, are sent to investigate the possible presence of another intelligent life-form on Fancyfree. At the edge of the sea, they witness the emergence of aliens which steal a robot and leave a small girl in its place.

Is she human? Should they risk taking her back to the holding, or should they kill her?

They decide to take her back, and she becomes the ward of the holding's surly, staunchly individualistic artisan, the Anglic, who comes to love her as his daughter.

From the beginning, "Maeve," as they call her, does not fit in. She still speaks the language of the aliens who left her; and she seems to have other strange talents as well, one of which includes talking to "seademons," those huge, squid-like monsters whom all men fear.

Time and again, she is denounced as a witch and, finally driven from the holding. Twice young men fall

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in love with her, only to meet misfortune. And what she does with her first-born, son of the heir-apparent to the Lord of the Holding, results in war between the humans and the seademons.

The story is told from Ciaran's point of view. The mystery is who, and what, is Maeve. The real aliens in the book are not the seademons, but the humans themselves.

The characters are outstanding. The whole action of the novel hinges on their obstinate humanity rather than outside influences. They refuse to understand or accept Maeve as she refuses to understand or accept them, and this is the theme of the book: humanity's unwillingness to live and let live—to fear and to try to subdue, or to destroy, whatever it cannot understand. It is familiar, but as Yep presents it, it is devastating.

The story begins abruptly with the appearance of Maeve, and then settles down into a liesurely style whose tone is fantasy-like. Things happen, but there is little dramatic impetus until the last half of the book, although none of it is dull for a moment. Some readers may be confused, or even bored, if they miss the point of what Yep is doing, for he is building his narrative on several levels at once. For a while, it seems the story is about the humans, Da, Ciaran, and her half-brother Athvel; then it is about Maeve again, then the seademons. Only gradually does Yep weave all the strands together in one thrilling climax. And the overall dramatic effect of the book is gentle and fairy-tale-like rather than violent and adventurous. But once he has achieved the climax, the thematic impact is powerful.

Some, like myself, may get pretty exasperated with the humans, who can be nble and obtuse at the same time. Ciaran is the worst of all. So brilliant and sensitive and perceptive, but when she tries to settle things with Maeve, her articulateness leaves everything to be desired. But Maeve and her friends are really just as bad, as Yep points out.

Still, while I don't argue the truth of Yep's theme, I did not find it convincing as he presented it, for the reasons stated in the last paragraph. Ciaran is just too good to be true. And her relations with her father are just a bit cute.

Yep has tried to create a heroine who is every bit the equal of her burly male peers, and an intellectual to boot; while at the same time, leaving her recognizable as an attractive young girl whom men fuss over. He almost brought it off, but only almost.

I was also not wholly convinced of the humans' regression into superstition, their eagerness to believe Maeve a witch. Primitive superstitions were aspects of primitive religion. They did not arise spontaneously, and they were supported by the upper classes and the church. This is not the case on Fancyfree.

But even as I write these criticisms, I can think of arguments that contradict them. And although they limit the book, they do not harm it much. *Seademons* is a fine novel, with, I should add, a fine cover painting by Frank Frazetta, and I recommend it absolutely.

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* * *

The John W. Cabal Awards

If anyone else but George R.R. Martin had edited *New Voices in Science Fiction,* I never would have read it. The title alone made me want to take a long walk in the country. And the subtitle, "Six Stories by Campbell Award Nominees," compelled me to open every window in the house despite the sub-freezing temperatures outside. But I'm a Martin fan. I trusted him. Oh, George, how could you treat me this way?

Of the six stories in the book, I read three, two of them willingly, and made painful attempts to read the others, none of which were successful. I know critics are not supposed to say (admit? confess?) things like that, but there is a kind of sf that destroys every last vestige of enthusiasm I have for the genre and sends me like a refugee to the television set; and almost invariably, it is to be found in anthologies with "award" in the title.

I did succeed in one case, Lisa Tuttle's "The Family Monkey." It revived an old fantasy of mine. I see myself as a teacher of creative writing, and someone like Tuttle has just handed in her manuscript, and I am filled with admiration. Such intelligence, sensitivity, and ability. A kid, and yet already she shows first-rate professional talent. What fine, clear prose; what conscientious character development; what attention to detail. I mark the paper "A" and pin it up on the bulletin board.

Then, I blink. I am back in my room with the story in the book before me. I am not a teacher, I am a reader. And the story I am reading is boring me out of my gourd.

I shift about anxiously. There is a tight knot in my gut. I hate it. But why? How can anyone hate anything in which he finds so much to admire?

Is it badly written? Hardly, by the most acceptable definitions of bad writing. But then what is good writing? One expects, and almost always gets, some sense of proportion in these things; the quality of the writing being in proportion to the quality of what is being written about. Consequently, a reviewer needs simply to quote a few lines to demonstrate the inferiority or superiority of both form and content. But in an increasing amount of sf it is no longer that easy. The kids have learned all the tricks, they know how to push all the buttons marked "literature." So what comes out looks and sounds very good, but reads very badly.

Lisa Tuttle's story is about a Texas family that adopts a marooned alien who becomes something special (or horrible) to each member of the family. It is an old idea, a simple idea, but she takes about forty-seven pages to tell it, and they read like something out of *Good Housekeeping.*

There are effective moments, especially the scene between Emily and her father, but nothing amounts to anything more dramatically substantial than another episode of *The Waltons;* for here, as there, sentimentality undermines the human reality.

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And here, as in the stories by Robert Thurston, Ruth Berman, and George Alec Effinger, there is not a moment of wonder. Not a moment of possibility. Let me illustrate what I mean by quoting their first sentences:

Tuttle: "I was sitting with Florrie on the porch of her Daddy's house, watching the night get darker and wondering about making a move."

Thurston: "Thomason first met Ludvik in 1953, on an unusually cold August day."

Berman: "The U's Miniver Cheevy Club's fall jousting went off well."

Effinger: "Les Gruen had a small cubicle for an office, a long walk from the elevators."

Now, let me quote the first sentences of the stories I liked:

Martin: "The crossworlds had a thousand names."

Pournelle: "Eight thousand young bodies writhed to the maddening beat of an electronic bass."

Were I a teacher of creative writing, I would have a long talk with Martin and Pournelle. "George, you worry me. You don't seem to be getting much out of this course. *Character*, George. That's what fiction is all about. Not spaceships and lost worlds and freaky-looking aliens. And you never start a story with a long exposition. And you have to got to watch the jargon. All those made-up names. People don't relate to smart-alecky aliens or exotic backgrounds. Character, George . . ."

He never listened. God knows, I tried. . .

Pournelle I would advise to give up writing entirely. No explanation. I'd simply refuse to have him in my class.

Martin's "The Stone City," tells the story of a man who finds himself marooned on a very remote world. He was part of the crew of a ship called the *Pegasus*, which may have fled to avoid destruction. All the rest of the crewmen died one by one; and he is left in an ancient stone city forced to steal to survive.

He has a companion who is mapping the labyrinth ways of the city, which is undermined by miles and miles of corridors; while the hero schemes to escape the planet before he goes mad. They are the only two humans there, and likely to be the last for a long time to come. Who he is, and how he got in this predicament, is related in flash-backs. What happens is murder and flight into the bowels of the city.

Martin has a way of taking an original idea and making it sound like something out of the 1930's. But once into a Martin story, I'm hooked, and I have fun all the way.

Pournelle's "Silent Leges" is about a young college student who inadvertently gets involved in a rebel student demonstration and winds up sentenced to three years at hard labor on a distant world where convicts are sold to plantation owners and, even when their sentences are up, never do get back to earth.

Pournelle reminds me of Ayn Rand in that his stories can be read two ways—as either straight melodrama or a hilarious parody of Hollywood films. As I read "Silent Leges," I could not help casting the picture: John Garfield as the boy. . .Akim Tamiroff as the plan-

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tation owner. . .H.B. Warner as Tappinger. . .Edward G. Robinson as Curt Morgan. Well, the descriptions don't fit, but you get the idea. You've seen it all on the Late Show many times. Pournelle has simply moved it into the 1960's and called it the future.

I loved it.

I'm serious. It was great fun.

But how could I love something in which I find so little to admire?

The truth is that I know there are people who will admire the stories I hated in this book, and deplore the ones I enjoyed. The best I can tell you is that the Martin and Pournelle stories are among the best these two are capable of, and that, for me, makes the book worth buying.

* * *

A tour de Dickson

Much attention is given to the "best" of the year, but little to the "worst;" and that is unfortunate, because there is so much more of the latter, and some of it is invariably better reading than the former. The quality of bad books varies, from simply unreadable to medicore to that impossible-to-define area of the good-bad; and while it hardly seems a compliment to say a writer has written a good-bad book, I, personally, would trade any number of Hugo winners for just one of them.

A good-bad book is one which succeeds in spite of itself; one whose technique or theme is indefensible, whose plotting may be ludicrous, whose characters are 99 44/100 per cent pure cardboard, and yet which, for all its failings, delivers a rip-roaring good read. How few books do!

Gordon R. Dickson's *Time Storm* is a good-bad book, and if there were an award category for such things I would not hesitate to vote for it.

It is the story of a man named Marc Despard who became a self-made millionaire before he was twenty-one, then suffered a heart-attack at twenty-four and went off to the woods to rebuild his health. While there, something most peculiar happened to the world, and in fact, to the entire universe. Great walls of mist descended upon the earth from space and began to move across the world, and wherever they touched, time changed. And people vanished—just about all the people who had ever lived.

Despard thought of his ex-wife and tried to reach her. He acquired two companions: a young mute girl, and a storm-shocked leopard named Sunday. Together they traveled over what was left of the world having adventures with creatures human and otherwise, and along the way they picked up a mother and her little girl, a group of men, whose allegiance was uncertain, and a young physicist who was studying the time storm. He was one who gave Despard the idea that it could be fought.

The idea gets further boost from a strange alien being named Porniarsk, or rather, his "avatar," who has been sent to Earth to try to stabilize the storm in that area. Porniarsk thinks Despard has special talents, and guides him toward developing them. How they fight the

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time storm, and what happens afterwards comprises the remainder of the novel.

If that sounds simple enough, let me say right away that this is one of Dickson's most ambitious and complex books and takes place on three levels simultaneously.

On the one hand, it is a straight-forward post-holocaust novel, with the survivors struggling to remain alive, meeting other survivors, setting up a community, and trying to solve the mystery of what has happened to the world.

On the other hand, it is a science fiction problem novel, in which the nature of the time storm and its solution occupies two-thirds of its length.

On still another hand, it is, like Gregory Benford's recent *In the Ocean of Night,* the story of a man's spiritual pilgrimage to self-discovery and fulfillment by way of human and extraterrestrial relationships. And it is this latter aspect that proves the key to the solution of the other two problems.

What is good about the book is that Dickson knows how to tell an exciting story. Not a chapter goes by without incident, and from the first, he commands our attention, if not with action, then with invention. First, he thoroughly involves us with the protagonists adventures, then with the problem of the time storm, then with the spiritual search of Marc Despard, keeping us guessing, wondering, all the while, what will happen next.

I found the last third of it overlong, but that my have been because I read the book too slowly. It should be read as fast as possible for, really, the story is all it has going for it. It is a cliché from beginning to end, and from top to bottom, without a stroke of originality except for the time storm itself, which struck me as ridiculous for the most part.

The hero is so heroic he becomes tedious toward the end; so super-intelligent, super-competent, super-lucky. Ho-hum. And as for his spiritual search, it is never credible for a moment. Dickson is only boring when he indulges Despard in soul-searching. As for the other characters, they are, like the plot, and everything in the plot, carbon copies of what you have read so many times before.

In short, it is that kind of book that if you think about it for even a moment it will fall completely apart. Totally superficial. And yet fun all the way.

What saves the book from unreadability, and from mediocrity, is Dickson masterful skill at narrative technique. He is a first-rate craftsman who knows how to put a complicated plot together, draw a character, or elucidate a theme in a few, or a few thousand, words. And if what he lacks here is originality, what he has is alot more going for him than you might think.

If I were teaching creative writing I would recommend this for study, for all the principles and techniques are here in full view as if it were designed for student writers. As it is, I will recommend it to anyone out there who enjoys a good rip-roaring adventure story with hard-sf problem-solving engineers going up against the galaxy. You won't admire it, but you'll love it. ★

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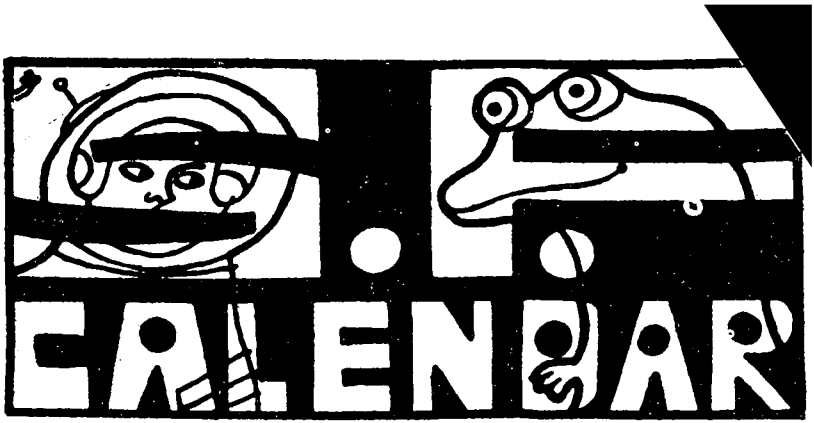

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